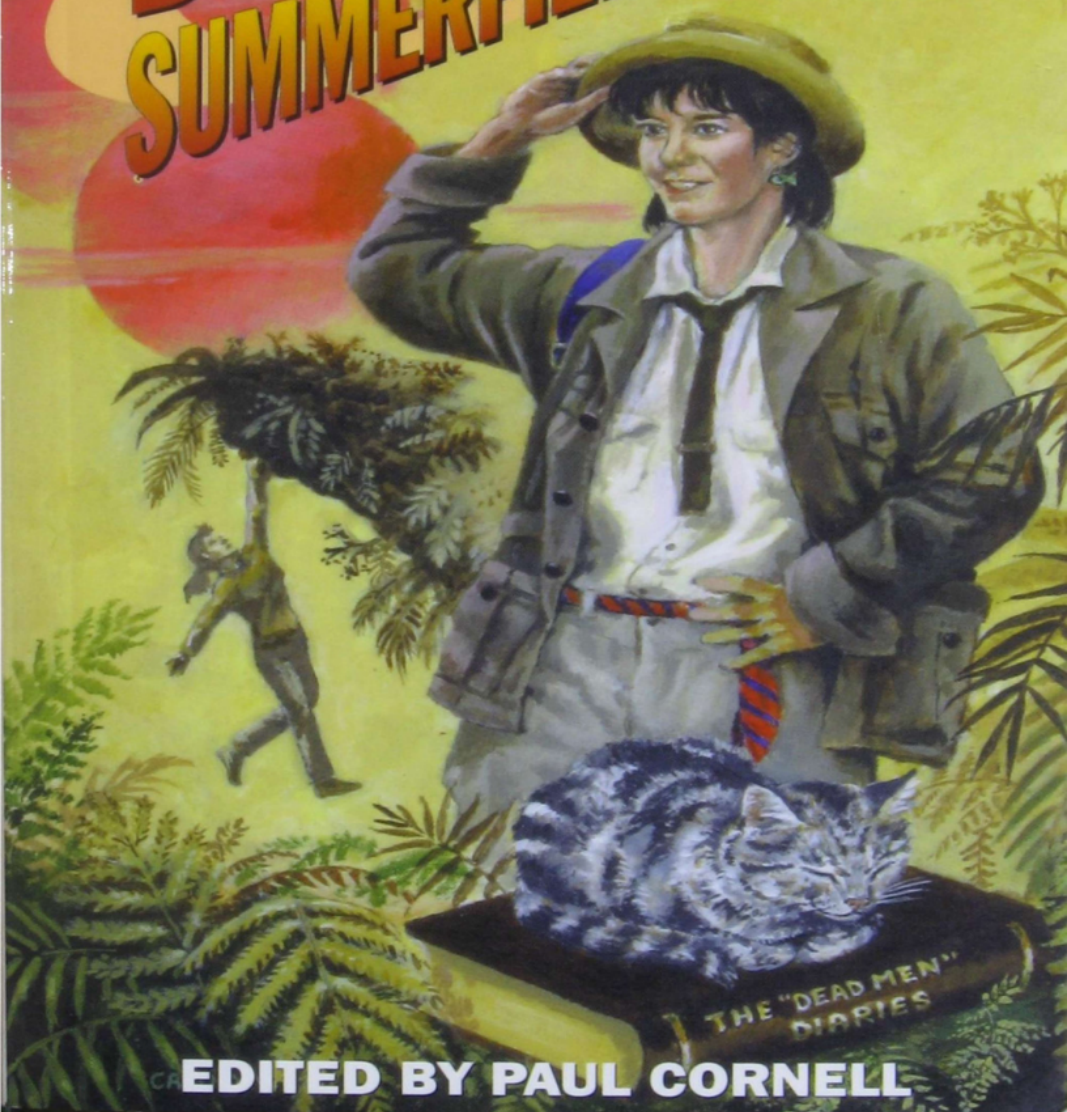


PROFESSOR

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

AND THE
DEAD MEN
DIARIES



EDITED BY PAUL CORNELL

PROFESSOR
BERNICE
SUMMERFIELD
AND THE DEAD MEN DIARIES

A Short-Story Collection
Edited by
Paul Cornell

Who but Professor Bernice Summerfield, interstellar archaeologist, raconteur, boozier and wit, would get other people to write her autobiography – albeit under threat of death from two bounty hunters sent by a publisher far too concerned about little things like deadlines?

These stories are an ideal introduction to the life of Bernice Summerfield: falling off cliffs, getting sacrificed to orange pygmies, saving the universe and trying to buy a new frock.

Cliffhanging escapes! Adventure on distant planets! Scones for tea!

The anthology includes new stories by SF author Kate Orman, *Queer as Folk* script-editor Matt Jones and Steve Moffat, the creator of *Coupling* alongside Mark Michalowski, Daniel O'Mahony, Eddie Robson, Cavan Scott & Mark Wright, Dave Stone, Kathryn Sullivan and Caroline Symcox.

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Bernice Summerfield was created by Paul Cornell
Irving Braxiatel was created by Justin Richards
Jason Kane was created by Dave Stone

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The Braxiatel Collection

‘Collection of what?’ is an invalid question. Arguably the finest and most extensive in the known universe, it is a collection of everything. The various departments of the Braxiatel Collection house antique artefacts, literature, playscripts, recordings of events and people and performances, geological specimens, software and hardware of days gone by... A permanent home for the Braxiatel Collection is currently under construction on a small planetoid formerly designated KS-159 – now known as the Braxiatel Collection. Fabulously rich, **Irving Braxiatel** is Renaissance Man for the new era. He is well-read, extremely learned, an expert in almost everything though in some matters he lacks practical experience. He does have a tendency to miss the details while looking at the big picture – details like how people actually feel about things, for example. He has built up his collection over the years – probably over the centuries. But how old he really is, whether or not he actually ever ages, is not something that it is polite to discuss.

Professor Bernice Summerfield is a guest of Irving Braxiatel. She is currently working (still) on the sequel to her best-selling coffee-table archaeology book *Down Among the Dead Men* (published originally in 2466, which is odd given it is now 2600). **Wolsey** is Benny’s tabby tomcat. He is putting on a bit of weight now and slowing down. In fact, he’s getting a bit lame in his back left leg. **Joseph** (so-called for historical and sentimental reasons) is Benny’s personal digital assistant. He is an AI computer system linked to the Braxiatel Collection’s main scheduling systems; roughly the size of a football. Personality-wise, (and again for historical/sentimental reasons) Joseph has been programmed to be ‘dry’ and literal. Not surprisingly, he spends most of his time switched off.

Ms Jones (not Miss or Mrs, note) is in charge of Administration. This includes overseeing the construction work and the tending of the gardens and grounds. She is a lady of uncertain age and unspecified background. If it seems she has something to hide, it is probably because she does. She is six feet tall and seems almost as wide. She wears horn-rimmed glasses on a chain round her neck and woe-betide you if she has cause to put them on... **Mister Crofton** is in charge of the grounds and gardens. He is a short, stocky man usually in his shirtsleeves and with a wheelbarrow close by. He is normally of a humorous and helpful disposition. But omit the ‘Mister’ ahead of his name and he immediately becomes surly and uncooperative. Ms Jones always calls him ‘Crofton.’ **Adrian Wall** is the construction manager. He is in charge of all the ongoing work at Braxiatel, and reports to Ms

Jones. Like most of his workforce, Wall is a Killoran – a seven-foot-tall cross between an ape and an upright wolf complete with fangs, snout and claws. **Broderick Naismith** is the Chief Public Relations Officer for the Collection. He is responsible for advertising, promotion, guide books and materials and all the notices. While Braxiatel is often detained at meetings with Naismith, nobody else has ever met him.

Introduction

Hi, James. I'm really sorry this is late. It's just that a lot of things came up which kept me away from my desk. For instance, I've moved to this wonderful little asteroid where Irving Braxiatel keeps his famous Collection. I'm Archaeologist in Residence, which offers a great deal of security for my previously freelance bottom. Not that my bottom has ever been in any sense for hire, you understand. It was all of me that... Look, it's a just a turn of phrase; okay? I'm dictating this quite fast, actually because you got all mopey about your deadline, and sent those bounty hunters after me. Which, need I say was quite a shock.

I thought we were friends. I liked you from the moment I sat down in your office and signed the contract for this book. Since then I have invited you to no less than eight of my birthday parties, and you have not had the good grace to attend even once.

Anyhow. I know that you actually asked for an autobiography And this is just that. Only it's written by other people. I had no option, James. Your two bounty hunters, Mr Plurk and Mr Scozz, took up residence in my rooms here, (scaring Wolsey so thoroughly that he absented himself for an entire week), and insisted they would not budge until I had completed the manuscript. Now, while I obviously had copious notes and much research material prepared, writing an entire autobiography within ten days, under the steely gaze of two professional killers, is the kind of task that would vex Aladdin.

So I went on the Galaxy Wide Web, looked up my name, and was delighted to find that many other people have been kind enough to write about my adventures. Obviously, I haven't included any of the porn. Despite the urgings of Mr Plurk, who is not, it must be said, as convincing in his role of Good Cop as Mr Scozz is as Bad Cop. I've secured publication rights, and checked through all the material for accuracy, so, yes, you can be reassured that this all really happened. Whatever that means.

I decided to keep the title we had previously settled on. As a sort of further sequel to Down Among the Dead Men. These may not be my diaries, exactly; but there are plenty of dead people in them. Not all of them from extinct civilisations.

And... Some of it is horribly revealing. You got the book you wanted, James, because the story of who I really am is in here, only I had to let other people tell it for me. Mostly. This may say something about me. But I have no idea what.

There. I've been speaking down this immediate audio dictation link for several days now, including an all-nighter that was something of a long dark night of the soul. Now, as soon as I've sent this off, I can go and tell Mr Plurk and Mr Scozz that they no longer have the right to sit in my

rooms consuming my muffins. And yes, that also means exactly what it says. I'm in no mood for double entendres.

Oh, and please take care to detach this note from the rest of the manuscript. I wouldn't want it ending up as the introduction or something.

Yours truly,

Prof. Bernice S. Summerfield.

The Dead Men Diaries

Erm, hello. This is me. Or rather, this should be me, given that it's meant to be a sort of autobiography. I'm Bernice Surprise Summerfield, Professor of Archaeology, former Head of the Archaeology Department at the University of Vremnya, former holder of the (now admittedly destroyed) Edward Watkinson Chair; currently working at the Braxiatel Collection. You may have heard of me. If you haven't % then your decision to buy this book strikes me as a bit eccentric. But, listen, I'm not quibbling.

I'm not after a particular audience. Although, actually; if you're one of that cult that worships me as a deity; from its church on that deserted aircraft carrier at the centre of the Medelein Sea on Phraxa – the one who instigated a galaxy-wide campaign to bring about my death because I wasn't quite living up to its image of me as a Madonna figure? Try the cookery section instead.

You don't, let me just say quickly, need to know anything about my previous existence to enjoy the stories that follow. I know that because I don't really know much about it, so I'm the ideal editor with respect to empathising with newcomers.

A quick run through my past. I've been a military cadet, an experience from which I'm proud to say I absconded at the first opportunity. I've been a traveller in time and space. Though I can't actually travel in time anymore, not without... But I'm getting ahead of myself. I've died at least twice. And, let me tell you, that's not all it's cracked up to be. I've achieved the dream of every thirty-something woman and become younger. I've written many books, some of them quite quickly, including the bestselling *Down Among the Dead Men* and *Incredibly Bad Jokes of the Twentieth Century*.

Will this do? I hate talking about myself. So, erm, I suppose the rest of this book is going to be a bit of an ordeal. For me, I mean.

I often use the phrase 'typical me', without ever really thinking about it. Various things are certainly typical me: going to sleep when I shouldn't; getting chatty with evil megalomaniacs who want to rule the universe and have lost the ability to gossip; beer. But, dear readers, you know what having a personality is like. Well, most of you do. It's a matter of things noticed in sidelong glances, what other people decide you are, acting up, playing along. Sometimes I think that I'm too many people, with all the versions of myself that I have to wear. And every now and then I lose who I am, or who I should be, completely.

When I first arrived at the Braxiatel Collection, (an experience which, I believe, is going to form the backbone of Professor Bernice

Summerfield and the Doomsday Manuscript, out soon from the same publishing house as this volume, but, phew, by a different author), I was recovering from some particularly fraught adventures. Time travel, other universes, the destruction of everything I'd previously relied upon to define me: that sort of thing. During those bad times I lost, across space and time, a certain someone to whom I had also looked for self-definition. That is to say I'd always previously been able to boast that at least I wasn't him. Even while I was married to him.

So looking back, it's obvious that I was a kicked puppy then. That I was trying to hide in the only thing I had left: my academic qualifications. It took one particular incident to remind me of what I hope is now once more the central truth of my existence: that wherever they find themselves, and whoever they're trying to be, Bernice Summerfields have adventures.

1: A Question of Identity

By Caroline Symcox

Research is a tiring business. There's no mistaking the fatigued look, the vacant expression and the shaking hands of someone who's been reading dull books for far too long.

Bernice had been studying long enough to tick all those boxes. She was sitting at a desk in a secluded corner of the Braxiatel Collection's archaeology section. With a pile of dusty books on one side of her, and a pile of dustier folders on the other, her attention was focused on her puter and the book in front of her.

She looked up and sighed. Her attention was starting to wander. What she needed at this point was a break, and a mug containing roughly equal proportions of liquid and caffeine. She clambered to her feet and headed for the kitchen, or more accurately, the kettle.

Watched kettles never boil, especially when you stare hard at them. Benny didn't know that someone else had entered the kitchen until they coughed pointedly.

Only one person coughed pointedly.

'How's the research going?' asked Irving Braxiatel.

Benny ran a hand through her hair. 'It's gone better. I'm still not used to digging through paper. I didn't realise academia was going to be so exhausting.'

Benny's patron and employer sat down beside her. 'You could always go back to being an archaeologist for hire.'

'No, that's the old me. She retired. I'm a serious academic now. Study, theses, publication. Respectability.'

'Hmm.' Braxiatel remained non-committal. 'And I was about to say it's time you had some fun.'

'Fun? I'm not here to have fun! I'm here to work! What have you been organising?'

'Oh, not much. Just a little black tie party, tomorrow night. A few visitors are arriving from the Delvian Academy.'

'Do I really have to go?'

'Yes.' Brax got up and headed for the door where he paused for a moment. Without looking round, he added,

'And you might want to think about buying something suitable to wear. Khakis may be the height of fashion on an archaeological dig, but social gatherings tend to require something slightly more formal.'

Before Benny could reply, he had disappeared.

Having gone through her entire wardrobe, which took less than thirty seconds, Benny realised that, yes, she was going to have to go shopping. Another bite out of her studying time. She wanted to buckle down to academic work, to justify her place at the Braxiatel Collection. That wasn't going to happen if she was constantly having to do things like go shopping.

She threw the bundle of clothes in the general direction of the wardrobe and snatched up her satchel. Wolsey looked at her accusingly.

She squatted to address the cat face to face. 'I know, I'm not spending enough time with you. But respectable academics need to have a respectable output of written work.'

The dress shop was relatively new, like all the shops on the asteroid that Braxiatel had chosen to house his collection.

However its novelty didn't limit its stock, as Benny was discovering. She had left her rooms with the sole intention of buying an evening dress that would suit her new academic image. You wouldn't have thought that locating and purchasing a becoming yet conservative garment would be that much of a challenge. But for a certain Bernice Summerfield, it was proving close to impossible. They did becoming. They did conservative. But did they do both?

Apparently not. She was on the verge of giving up when she saw the dress.

And what a dress.

It was blue, it shimmered, it called out to her, 'Buy me! Buy me!'

Benny was in love.

Attempting nonchalance, she turned to the proprietor.

'Um, this one here, how much?' The man told her. She wished he hadn't. She circled the dress trying to find some reason not to buy it.

She really couldn't afford anything this expensive.

She needed a proper excuse.

She would just try it on. If she tried it on, there was bound to be something wrong with it. It would fit badly, or fall the wrong way, or make her look like a tart.

She just had to get inside it.

In the fitting room, she realised how wrong a person could be. It fitted perfectly. It emphasised all the right bits and hid all the wrong bits. It made her look slim and gorgeous. Even under the fluorescent fitting room lights there was no denying that this was a magical dress.

There was only one problem. It was neither merely becoming nor conservative.

On the night of the party Benny inspected her reflection in the mirror. She looked bloody gorgeous. Damn it.

She'd just have to make the best of it. So long as she remained polite, sober and serious, she could still impress the Delvian visitors with her talent and professionalism.

'Cinderella,' she said, 'you shall go to the dinner party.'

Benny stood on the threshold of storage room forty-six, framed by the doorway. The tiny chamber was overwhelmed by the hundred or so guests inside, its shabbiness betraying the fact that it was still under construction. The walls were bare, a ladder stood abandoned, in a corner. Brax hadn't made much of an effort to prepare it as a gathering place, leaving everything much as it had been during the day. In fact, the only noticeable change was the construction of the bar, achieved by dragging a couple of tables together and spreading a cloth over them. This was all very suspicious.

Brax never seemed to do anything without having planned it meticulously beforehand.

The guests on the other hand were frighteningly smart, the men in well-creased tuxedos, the women in prim and demure dresses. The plan was fairly simple – go to pre-dinner drinks, meet these prestigious academics, impress them. But Benny was uncomfortably aware that in this company it rather looked as though she had arrived in her night-shirt.

At least it was a damn sexy night-shirt.

Benny hitched her filmy scarf around her shoulders, and strode into the throng.

Brax was standing over by what was currently masquerading as the bar, exchanging pleasantries with a small selection of the guests. 'Benny!' He turned to her and smiled. 'So glad you could make it at last.'

She forced herself to smile back. 'Well I'm here now, serious, sober and academic. Who should I chat up first?'

'Chat up?' Brax stared at her.

'Talk to!' Bernice realised that people were looking at her and lowered her voice. 'I mean just talk to! To demonstrate my breadth of academic knowledge! Which of these are the movers and shakers?'

Brax let out a sigh of relief. 'Apart from me, you mean? Try the man to left of the nibbles. He's Professor Hayes, the foremost authority in the field of vehicular archaeology. I ought to warn you though, he can be a little difficult.'

'I'm here precisely to impress people who can be a little difficult.'

'I'm impressed. Can I get you a drink?'

'Mineral water.'

'Now I'm astonished.'

Professor Hayes turned out to be a short, balding man with an intense stare. As Benny discovered when he looked up from the nibbles.

Benny extended a hand. 'Professor Summerfield.'

'Oh yes,' he smiled, 'the author of "The Traxian Paradox: A New Perspective", a work which I read with great interest.'

'Really?' It was Benny's first piece of work aimed squarely at an academic audience, and she was rather proud of it.

'What did you think? Did you like it?'

Hayes looked at her for a long moment. 'Oh, absolutely not. The language was colloquial, its intellectual value was minimal at best, and to be honest, I'm surprised that any self-respecting publisher saw fit to print it.'

Then he walked away.

Benny took a deep breath. 'Bar,' she said to herself.

Three small glasses of white wine later, Benny had carefully selected her next target and was nearly ready to approach them. However Brax then announced that the party was moving on to the main dining room.

As they entered, Benny realised why Brax had held the pre-dinner drinks in such a plain location. The contrast between the storage room sans decoration and Brax's Hall of Mirrors was staggering, and the gasps of her fellow guests said it all.

She remembered her own reaction on seeing the Hall for the first time – not knowing where to look, gaze flitting from the oil-painted ceiling to the crystal chandeliers to the lamp-bearing statues and finally to the seventeen arched windows, reflected in the mirrors along the opposite wall. Now the sky outside was dark, and the mirrors only showed the blackness behind the dining table, but that just seemed to heighten the beauty of the whole. Brax really knew how to make an impact.

By the time the dinner came to an end with the best chocolate mousse she had ever tasted, Benny was feeling rather unsteady. It must have been all those mirrors.

Nevertheless as the diners began to leave the tables and gather into rather more vocal groups around the hall Benny felt ready to return to the fray. It was quite acceptable for a respectable academic to have the occasional glass of wine.

What was important now was to regain the ground she had lost. She would pick a guest and go to work. And there he was. Standing in a corner on his own looking reassuringly nervous.

The man looked up from studying his feet as Benny approached and extended her hand.

‘Hi! I’m Professor Bernice Summerfield. You look like you’re in need of someone to talk to.’

‘Professor Erich Fromm, of the Delvian Academy. And no, I’m not. Really.’

‘The Delvian Academy, eh? That’s the name on everyone’s lips. Is it true that you hold the wildest parties this side of the Horsehead Nebula?’

Fromm coughed, fiddling with his bow-tie. ‘No, Professor, it isn’t.’

‘Call me Benny. That’s a bit of a shame, isn’t it? If you’re going to have a reputation it may as well be for being the party-animal university.’ She thought about that for a second. ‘Or not.’ She groped for another subject. ‘Do you belong to the Comparative Religion Society? I’ve heard they’re cooking up something big on the Traxis Four dig. The smart money’s on you lot turning out the prize thesis first, isn’t it?’

It still wasn’t working. The man was as nervy as ever. What was she doing wrong?

‘I don’t belong to that society. I really don’t know anything about such things, Prof... er, Benny.’ Swiftly, as if on impulse, he turned the conversation. ‘What is it that you’re working on at the moment?’

Benny felt a surge of elation. He wanted to know about her academic work!

‘Actually, I’m currently working on one of the finds from the 2205 expedition to Traxis Six. It’s taking a while, as my computer’s translation program is slightly antiquated, but I’m digging up some pretty interesting stuff.’

The look on Fromm’s face dissolved into outright fear. He seemed to have to clear his throat before he could respond.

‘Well, that’s very, er, very helpful for you, isn’t it? Anyway, I really ought to be going...’

But she’d just started her academic conversation! She grabbed his arm with Chardonnay-fuelled aggression. ‘Hold on! What I’m finding out from this book they discovered on Traxis Six is really exciting! You see, I was with that team on Traxis Four when they discovered evidence of ancient civilisation. What was found and what the book reveals match up beautifully!’

Fromm tried to detach Benny’s fingers from his arm, obviously having to restrain himself from actually tearing his arm out of her grasp and running away.

‘Do you realise how much the earlier dig on Traxis Six was passed over by other archaeologists?’ Benny continued desperately. ‘There are only three references to the dig that are of any use in this whole

collection. As it turned out. And I'd already moved everything to the main concourse to get to the secondary documents more easily.'

Fromm let go of her fingers and stared at her. Even through her alcoholic haze she noticed the intensity of his expression. What had she said?

'You've had to move everything?'

'Yes. Saves me from having to run from one end of the Collection to the other when I'm researching.'

'Where have you moved everything to exactly?'

Benny looked at him quizzically. 'Why?'

'Well... we haven't been shown round the Collection... and I need to know where the... study areas are. Most of this place seems to be still under construction.'

'Ah, well you want the main concourse, or any of its surrounding stacks. I'm in the corner of the hall, gives me extra privacy. You know, it's a fabulous building. For something so recently completed it's wonderful to work in, has a real atmosphere...'

Fromm raised his hand to cut her off. 'I really ought to be going, people to talk to, you know.' He nodded brusquely and vanished into the crowd.

Benny watched him go, in despair. So much for networking, so much for making a good impression. She was an embarrassment. A useless, tarted-up, drunken wannabe.

Maybe if she went to bed now, then she could avoid embarrassing herself further – damage limitation. She looked around to make her excuses to Brax, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She made her way unsteadily to the exit, resolving to get back to her rooms as quickly as possible.

She didn't know how long she had been walking down the empty, echoing corridor before she heard the noise of footsteps behind her.

'Professor Summerfield! Thank goodness I caught up with you! When you left the party I was afraid that I'd never get a chance to talk to you!'

It was a tall, attractive young man. Around twenty-five, her brain assessed without her willing it to: brown eyes, dark hair, in great shape, fit in more ways than one. It was a pity he'd arrived at exactly the wrong time.

He took one of her hands impulsively. 'I kept looking for you at the party. I thought you'd have stayed until the end. I don't think I could have coped without actually meeting you.'

'Why did you think I'd stay 'til the end?'

'Well, you're Bernice Summerfield. I thought you'd be dancing on the tables.'

Bernice turned from him and started to walk away.

He followed her. 'I'm Guy Chisholm, researching my postgraduate thesis. I'm with the Academy. I know, you probably think I'm drunk or something, letting my emotions get the better of me. You're probably right.

'But you're the one who inspired me to study archaeology: reading about you, all the things you've done, and then getting your book, it made me think that archaeology was more interesting than just messing about in ditches. It all made me want to do it all myself. I suppose you're my role model.'

She really didn't need this. She wasn't that person anymore. Why did people still want her to be? 'So do you dance on tables? Do you get pissed all the time?' She turned and grabbed him by the lapels. 'Would you go out in a dress like this?'

He flinched, and swallowed visibly. 'If you really wanted me to.'

Oh please. Benny let go and marched off down the main staircase, its marble steps descending into the gloom.

Guy trotted after her. 'I don't understand! Why are you acting like this? What have I said?'

'You don't get it, do you? I'm not the person you think I am. The old Benny is gone! I'm a sober, serious academic now! I don't get involved in... Ooof!'

Professor and postgrad crashed to the floor.

Benny got up, cursing. 'What the hell was that? Who would leave stuff lying at the bottom of a...'

It was a body. The body of a security guard. The unfortunate man was out cold, but at least, as Benny discovered, he was still breathing.

Guy's face lit up with excitement. 'Come on!' he whispered, 'let's investigate!' Before she could protest, he grabbed her hand to pull her further into the library.

In the night-time lighting the main concourse was a ghostly place, only lit at very infrequent intervals, its shelves and desks wreathed in shadows. Benny followed reluctantly as they crept deeper into the stacks. Faint noises emanated from the darkness ahead of them. Suddenly Guy's hand tightened round her own, and he hauled her back into the cover of the nearest partition.

'Look!' he hissed, gesturing wildly.

Benny tiptoed to the edge of the shelves and craned her neck to look round them. Not far away a dark figure was systematically searching the desks that ran along the wall.

She ducked back into cover, and placed a hand on Guy's shoulder. 'Right,' she whispered, 'come on.'

She took his hand firmly and dragged him back to the foot of the

staircase.

‘What are you doing?’ hissed Guy.

‘I’m going to alert security.’

‘Aren’t you going to deal with him yourself?’

‘I’m a professor of archaeology, not an action hero!’

‘But you’re Bernice Summerfield! She would just go down there and deal.’

‘But I can’t do that anymore!’ Benny only just stopped herself from shouting. ‘Brax wouldn’t want me to! I’m respectable now!’ She was getting angrier by the second.

‘Would I be walking around dressed like this if I was still ready to wade into danger at a moment’s notice?’ She snatched up her dress, ready to walk off. ‘I’m not your Bernice Summerfield, I’m a boring academic! And you know what? I’m happy being –’

She stopped, feeling the fabric between her fingers. Slowly she looked down at the dress, and then she realised.

It wasn’t the dress of a boring academic.

It was her. The blue silk was all that was left of who she was.

Her eyes were still on the material as she continued softly,

‘No, I’m not happy.’ Her voice rose. ‘All this wading through paperwork, being polite to people who should be ritually slaughtered, staying quiet and respectable, fitting in. It’s... just... not me.’ Her head snapped up and she grinned wolfishly at the postgrad. ‘You’re right, I am Bernice Summerfield. You go and alert security. I’ll start acting like her.’

So, as Guy headed back up the stairs, Benny crept down the hallway once again.

This time though, she was ready for action.

* * *

Benny wasn’t the only person creeping purposefully around the Collection that night. On the attic level of the Mansionhouse, a group of shadowy figures were making their way to the door of a secluded storage room. One of them got out a small pouch of tools and set to work on the lock, while the others gathered behind him, keeping watch.

There was a shower of electronic sparks, and the door swung open.

‘We’re in,’ whispered the leader.

Inside the room were piles of crates and boxes, haphazardly thrown together.

The tallest figure looked around, then turned to the one who’d got the door open. ‘All right, Mason, which box is it in?’

Mason gestured hopelessly. ‘Braxiatel isn’t famed for good filing. I suppose we’d better just start at the top and work our way down.’

The leader of the group snorted angrily. 'I thought you were supposed to have this job properly researched! You don't even know where the thing is?'

The others were already starting to open crates and rifle through their contents as Mason glared at his superior.

'There's a difference between researching theology and organising crime! We didn't have a chance to properly investigate this place. You said the invitation was too good a chance to pass up. Two weeks later we're on a shuttle and we barely know the layout!'

Another member of the group turned to face them. 'Look, it isn't going to take Braxiatel long before he realises we're missing from his soiree. Do you two want to stop arguing and start searching?'

The lights snapped on, temporarily blinding everyone in the room.

A quiet, refined voice spoke from the doorway, 'Admirable advice. A little late now, though. I think you'll agree that this is a thoroughly fair cop.'

As their vision cleared the would-be burglars realised that it was indeed.

Braxiatel stood in the doorway, arms folded, a satisfied half-smile on his face. As one of the men reached tentatively for a crowbar, he cleared his throat. 'I wouldn't do that, if I were you. This room is wired with an automatic defence system. If you make any threatening moves towards me, you'll find yourself disabled. Rather painfully, in fact.'

As if to reinforce his point, a dozen armed guards appeared in the doorway.

Braxiatel's smile grew broader. 'Oh, and they would probably give it a hand.'

The hand retracted from the crowbar.

Frost stepped forward. 'What makes you think that we were doing anything illegal? We were just looking round the Collection. That's not against the rules, is it?'

Braxiatel sighed. 'Please, credit me with a little intelligence. I have known about the plans of the Delvian Comparative Religion Society for the last, oh, two months or so? It was only a matter of time before you got to my share of the artefacts, so I thought I would lure you here a bit earlier than you had planned. I think you fell for my charade hook, line and sinker. Why do you think you even managed to get into this room?'

The intruders exchanged sheepish looks.

'It doesn't look like you found what you were searching for, though.' Braxiatel padded over to a crate leaning against the far wall, his eyes still on the thieves. Opening its lid with one deft movement he beckoned them over. 'I believe this is what you were looking f...'

His voice trailed off. The box was empty.

Braxiatel stood there, nonplussed, brain working frantically. Suddenly his eyes lit up and he snapped his fingers.

‘Benny!’ he exclaimed.

He raced across the room and out towards the main concourse.

* * *

Benny crept silently through the hall on her stockinged feet, flitting from partition to partition towards the burglar. He was searching each table in turn, inspecting the covers of every book he came across. He was clearly after something in particular – he wasn’t an opportunist.

He found what he was looking for as Benny was just two partitions away from him. She heard his stifled exclamation of delight, and craned round the pillar to see what it was he was after. She was shocked to discover that it wasn’t just any book, but the artefact she had spent the last three days engrossed in!

Forgetting herself completely, Benny broke out of cover.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing? That’s my book!’

If the burglar’s head had turned any faster he’d have got whiplash. With a squeak of fright he hugged the book close to his chest and ran off down the concourse.

Benny gave chase, hitching up her skirts and sprinting after him. When she drew close enough, she threw herself at him in a running tackle, bearing him easily to the floor.

The man grabbed Benny’s dress, and as she tried to pull away, the sheer material tore with a terrible ripping sound.

Her beautiful new dress, her beautiful expensive new dress had been torn from ankle to thigh.

A shout of rage exploded from Benny and she threw a punch at the man’s jaw. The blow connected with a satisfying thump. His limp body fell to the floor.

Benny climbed to her feet, contemplating her ruined dress, and stood looking down at the unconscious man, breathing hard. Only then did she realise who he was. Erich Fromm, the nervous professor from the party!

When Braxiatel appeared at the foot of the stairs she was still wide-eyed. He strode purposefully over to his resident archaeologist and gazed down at the motionless thief.

Finally he looked up, catching Benny’s eye. ‘Do you think that next time you could possibly ask questions first and knock them unconscious later?’ he said. ‘Interesting alteration to the dress, by the way.’

‘Mmm.’ Benny’s breathing still hadn’t returned to normal.

‘I didn’t know that punching someone could be so therapeutic. Do

you know who that is?!

It was at this point that security arrived, and set about handcuffing the recovering burglar.

‘Of course.’

‘In that case would you be kind enough to explain to me why someone who I thought was a distinguished professor was down here playing at cops and robbers?’

Braxiatel sighed. ‘He was after the book, one of the ten artefacts from Traxis Six. I should have let you in on my grand scheme, but you were so engrossed in your academic work that I didn’t want to disturb you.’

‘Surely no one would be interested enough to actually steal artefacts recovered from the Traxis Six dig?’

‘Well now, that entirely depends on how fanatical and/or unscrupulous said people are, wouldn’t you say?’ Braxiatel raised an eyebrow. ‘There are people about who would do anything to be the first to publicise the link between the two expeditions. And if they had the artefacts in their possession then no one else could be researching them or publishing theses on them.’

‘So you’re telling me that the Delvian Academy was behind this?’

‘Not the entire Academy. Just its Comparative Religion Society. They’ve been stealing Traxis Six artefacts for a while now, and I calculated that they would get around to the book sooner or later. I ensured it was sooner by inviting them to the party. That way I could set them up and catch them red handed. You do realise that you nearly spoiled the whole thing? Why didn’t you tell me you had moved the book?’

Benny had the grace to look a little sheepish. ‘I just didn’t get round to it. No harm done, though, is there? Book recovered, burglars caught.’

‘A good night’s work.’ Braxiatel conceded.

Benny gave him a sly look. ‘It’s not over yet.’

As Benny entered the Hall of Mirrors for the second time that evening, she turned heads. Whereas the dress had been eye-catching before, the rips now made it impossible to ignore.

Her movements showing an indecent amount of leg, Benny strode through the various groups, looking for one man in particular. She found him preying on a group of anthropologists, and with a predatory grin of her own she closed in on him. ‘Professor Hayes, I believe our conversation was cut short earlier. There’s a couple of things I want to add. You, Professor are an overstuffed, pompous, intellectual fascist of a man who deserves to be exhibited in a museum rather than study in one. Have a nice evening.’

And with that she turned on her heel and marched out of the room.

On the threshold she collided with an excited Guy.

‘Benny! I’m so sorry I missed all the action. Security wouldn’t let me come down and help. They’ve only just let me out. What happened?’

She smiled. ‘I dealt.’ She turned to leave. But then an idea struck her.

She swung back, caught Guy by the shoulders, pushed him up against the wall and snogged him.

Braxiatel tapped her on the shoulder as he passed.

‘Welcome back, Benny,’ he said.

Sometimes Braxiatel knows me better than I know myself. Sometimes. Sometimes he displays great insight into human nature, and sometimes he thinks that people are interested in carpeting. Hence the row we had over the proposed carpet wing of the Collection, where researchers would be free to wander over acres of rare and collectible carpet from all the cultures of the universe. I won that one. Of course, weeks later, the Jasicans announced the launch of World of Carpet, an entire planet devoted to the artform. Which has now gone on to become the biggest intellectual tourist attraction in this part of the galaxy.

But I still believe that I was right. I’m just not sure how, exactly.

To return, briefly, to the matter of who I am: it might be said that one only really finds out who one is when one is alone.

Well, rollocks to that, say I. In my life, I’ve spent far too much time by myself. Maybe it’s fun after a week of partying to crawl back to your rooms and enjoy your own company, but –

Hmm. Wait a moment.

Unfortunately, the bounty hunters who are looking over my shoulder have prevented me from testing that hypothesis. They just would not believe that it was a matter of research. The gits.

*Did I mention them? Sorry. I have to be honest with you, dear reader. This manuscript is being produced under duress, because... because my publisher is so eager for another book from me. Copies of my first bestseller, *Down Among the Dead Men*, are still available at all good booksellers. They are, aren’t they?*

Apparently, it has been some time since my guests have visited a good bookseller.

Anyway, what I’m saying is: I don’t actually whoop for joy at the thought of being alone. Which is sometimes bad news for an archaeologist. The following is, I gather, a story that’s been waiting a long time to be written. One of my greatest hits, if you like. What happened on Capella Four. I’m glad that it’s here for posterity now. I’m glad that it mentions Joseph, a part of my old life that I’ve been able to hang on to, thanks to Braxiatel’s reconstruction skills. And who at the moment is rushed off his

motor units preparing tea and cakes for three every five minutes. I'm glad also that this is in print now, so I can just refer people to this book, and don't have to keep telling the story myself. Reading over it again took me back there. And back there is a place I rarely like to visit.

2: Steal from the World

By Kate Orman

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown,
Thus unlamented let me die;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.
(Alexander Pope, *Ode on Solitude*)

Benny was the only human being on the entire planet. Her landing pod had set her down on the largest continent, in a great, semi-arid valley punctuated by plateaux.

Twenty-something years ago, she had also been the only human on Capella Four. Since her visit, the little world had barely been disturbed: a few mineralogical surveys, a couple of damaged ships stopping for repairs and supplies. Only one other archaeological expedition had been attempted, and it hadn't found what it was looking for.

But then, they didn't have what Benny had.

She took out the faded photo from her rucksack. The tattered rectangle, a two-dimensional print from an actual silver halide emulsion, showed part of a rock face covered in cave paintings. The photographer was standing several metres back to get it all in, but you could still make out the images: a cavalcade of figures stampeding across the stone, humanoid, animal, unknown.

The photo had brought her here once before, all those years ago, in search of a discovery that would have made a young archaeologist's career.

Capella Four's gentle axial tilt meant gentle seasons, and the planet's distance from the binary star meant only small fluctuations in heat and radiation. Life clung to this ball of rock with a businesslike tenacity and not much creativity: the planet seemed to have given up after developing half a dozen basic living forms. An early survey showed twenty-six species of plant analogous to Earth's bracken fern, all of them completely identical except for their size. Her current camp site was shaded by specimens of the greater fern, and surrounded by a colony of the lesser fern. Miniature and pygmy ferns crunched under her boots as she set up her tent.

The world was too young, and the conditions too harsh, to reasonably expect anything intelligent to live here. Which was why only a truly daring and imaginative archaeologist would investigate

for signs of the legendary vanished Aurigan civilisation.

The young Bernice Summerfield had arrived on the planet with her fedora firmly planted on her head and a herbal cigarette gripped in her grin. She had been here for fortune and glory, and no mistake, with her rucksack on her back and her knife at her hip.

She'd sauntered away from the landing pod, her step springy in the low gravity. A hot, quiet little world, she'd thought. And it's all mine. She'd flicked her fag end into the undergrowth and plucked the photo from her rucksack.

It hadn't been hard to get funding for this little expedition.

They hadn't even tried to check her credentials. All she'd wanted was the fare here, the landing pod, and basic equipment. And her salary, of course, for a three-week trip to find the lost rock paintings of the mysterious Aurigans.

She had picked up the photo, along with the rest of a deceased explorer's bits and pieces, at a garage sale on the planet of Hitchemus. The Lalandian kid flogging it hadn't known it was worth anything, but young Bernice knew the knock of opportunity when she heard it. She had played it cool, seeming more interested in the dead traveller's pots and pans than his souvenirs. In the end, she bought the lot.

Still had the cooking gear, tucked away in the lander.

The miniature spacecraft had contained most of what she would need until the mothership came back to pick her up: tent, sleeping bag, supplies of soap and reasonably edible food. There had been a comlink in the pod locked in to the nearest relay station. Her personal link had dangled from her left ear.

The traveller's journals had been surprisingly little help.

She knew he had explored this volume of space, and that he'd planned a return trip which never happened. It had been the plants in the snapshot that had lead her to identify Capella Four, matching the ubiquitous ferns and fat spherical fungi to this little world's repetitive biosphere. The double shadow thrown by the photographer had been her other big clue.

She had glanced at the photo, looked around. She was atop a plateau, with a good view of the valley. Although the picture had been taken lower down, near the base of one of the cliffs that shot up from the valley floor, it was clearly the same landscape. Using hints from the journals, she had been able to identify it to within fifty square miles. A few day's hiking around, and she'd make the discovery that would make her career.

The grass and the low ferns had started crackling. Startled, Bernice had realised her cigarette had set the dry vegetation on fire. It had taken her five panicked minutes and a ruined sleeping bag to beat the flames out.

Benny smiled ruefully at the memory of her younger self as she set up camp. Setting fire to the planet would have made her famous, all right.

Finding concrete evidence of the Aurigans would have got her remembered for rather better reasons. In those days, there was nothing but hints and whispers to go on; obscure references in certain cultures' literature, star maps older than the human race. At least vanished cultures like the Iq-Qaba had left the odd building and language lying around. There didn't seem to be anything left of the Aurigans at all.

The weather was clear and fine, with a soft breeze whispering over the landscape. It was already late afternoon.

She had chosen a spot next to one of the plateaux, where she'd have some shade in the morning.

In a rugged landscape like this, you didn't want the sun getting in your eyes.

The thin trees weren't strong enough to bear a hammock.

She had brought a light bed with folding legs. Mosquito netting formed a secure box around the bed. She knew exactly what walked around on the ground during the short nights, and wanted plenty of distance between her and it.

There – with the stuff in her rucksack, she had all the basic things she'd need. Everything else was back in the landing pod. The design hadn't changed since her original expedition: it was still a livid green egg, twice her height, difficult to lose. And it was still slightly too small on the inside to be really comfy. She crunched across to the pod and thumbed the outer door control.

Joseph shot out of the pod. 'May I assist you?' he said.

Benny wondered if she detected a hint of sarcasm in the way the white ball was hovering. Surely not.

'Just getting my stuff together for today's work.' Benny opened her palmtop and took a look at her map. The transport ship International Klein Blue had dropped a satellite into geostationary orbit for a few hours, long enough to scan the area and build up a detailed map of the terrain.

Joseph hovered at her shoulder, peeking at the map. She had divided it into search squares, marking out cliffs and rocks which were likely sites for the paintings. Without that map, she'd be searching in the dark.

'Shall I accompany you?' said Joseph.

'Ah, no, that's all right.' Benny put her palmtop away. 'I want to do this alone. And get it right this time.' The white ball twitched. 'But I promise I'll call in every two hours. You can stay here and tidy the pod. Or whatever.'

Young Bernice hadn't been able to afford the satellite time to create a map. Her plan was to chart the site using her holocamera, and a bit of software that would patch her images together into a master image of the terrain. She had spent that first morning walking the circumference of the plateau, taking snaps. Inching closer to the accident with every step.

It had happened in an instant, in a handful of steps blinded by the double sun.

Bernice was certain there was no moment at which she had lost consciousness. She had been trained how to handle a fall: as the cliff edge crumbled under her weight, she curved her back without thinking about it, keeping her head off the ground as she slid and tumbled the first few metres.

She threw up great puffs of dry soil as she slid, scrambling to grab hold of a rock, a root, anything, the skin whipped from her arms and palms in seconds. She somersaulted once, arms curving to protect her head and neck, and scraped down the slope on her chest.

Her mind was still seconds behind her body, just starting to think, 'Bloody hell, I've gone and fallen off the bloody cliff.'

She slid out into space, her back twisting as she clutched at nothing.

She fell straight down, twenty metres, and landed with a cracking sound that echoed through the dry valley.

Her head never touched the ground.

There was no time to think about it. She had minutes, maybe seconds, before the shock kicked in.

Her rucksack was tangled beneath her, the strap still twisted around her arm. She shouted and roared as she moved to get it free. She didn't need the medical scanner to tell her she'd broken both legs.

Her left femur had snapped right through. Right now she was bleeding to death on the inside. The scanner was flashing instructions, but she was already ripping open a shock kit with her teeth, slapping the series of patches on to exposed skin on her arms and neck. They stung where they touched the abrasions that covered her.

She slit open the chinos with her knife and applied more patches to the swelling fracture. The bone hadn't broken the skin, thank the Goddess. Her foot was turned at a revolting angle. She tried not to look at it.

The smart drugs in the patches would curtail the blood loss into the tissues surrounding the fracture, recycling the lost fluids back into her body, breaking up dangerous clots as they formed. They had instantly reduced the exploding pain to a searing ache. They were also making her high as a kite.

More patches went on her right shin. The scanner showed that the tibia had snapped. Not nearly as serious as the fractured thigh, but it

meant there was no hope of her walking.

The inflatable splints were the size of a fingernail. She slipped one between her knees and gently squeezed on the activator. Immediately soft foam began to expand against the cloth of her chinos. Carefully, carefully, she turned her right leg until it rested against the foam, her foot pointing in a reasonable direction.

Handles sprang from the foam. They were designed for a second person to tie around her legs, securing the splint. Her head spun as she dragged herself into a sitting position, scrabbling to reach the handles near her ankles. Her legs pounded with pain.

Finally, tied as tightly as she could manage, she fell back against the cliff. Dry soil ran down her back as she stared at her newly packaged legs.

According to the medical scanner, the shock was mostly under control. Neither the breaks nor the splint had cut off circulation to her feet. The rest of her injuries were trivial by comparison: lots of bruising, lots of abrasions and lacerations, but nothing that a few minutes with a tube of gel couldn't take care of. Right at that moment, she was grateful as hell for her military training.

Her next step was to phone home and get a medivac team down here, fast. It was going to be okay. A week in a basic field facility, and she'd be a hundred percent.

She reached for her earring radio, and found an earlobe caked with blood. The personal link had torn loose during her fall.

She looked up into the silent sky, at the looming shape of the cliff. Her main comlink was at the top, in the pod. Barely a hundred metres away. Straight up.

Benny stood at the bottom of the cliff, staring up. She was certain this was the spot. She'd vaguely hoped for some sign of her fall, maybe scrapes in the soil preserved in the warm, dry climate. She meandered back and forth, pushing aside leaves, searching in a half-hearted way.

Funny old world. A landmark of her life had left no mark at all on this little planet. The fungi and the ferns had gone on with their simple life cycles, erasing any trace that she had ever been there.

Benny peered up at the top of the cliff, shading her eyes with a hand. Goddess, imagine if the gravity had been closer to Earth's. She probably would have broken every bone in her body.

She froze, eyes flicking to her left, then turned sharply.

There was nothing there, just narrow powder-blue trees swaying in the gentle breeze.

Benny relaxed, and started rolling her shoulders, working the tension out of the muscles. 'Getting paranoid in my old age,' she muttered. Capella's animal life only came out at night. If there were

any ships or activity in this area, the satellite map would have picked them up.

But the feeling remained, like someone's finger between her shoulderblades.

Benny's eyes widened. Up amongst the ferns growing from the cliff face – no, she wasn't imagining it – there was a patch of colour not found in nature. At least, not this iteration of nature.

The slope was surprisingly gentle. With exaggerated care, she pulled herself up. The ferns were deeply rooted, hooked into the rock behind the crumbling soil, tough enough to give her a series of handholds.

She reached out, stretched, and plucked the piece of plastic from the leaf it was hanging from.

It was her earring radio, a chunk of deep green plastic in the shape of a cartoon fish. They had been all the rage that year – conspicuous, goofy personal communications links.

Goddess, come to think of it, hadn't she'd owned a palmtop that looked like a blue plastic hippo? Ugh, Summerfield, put it out of your mind.

There was still dried blood caked on the clip where it had ripped loose from her ear.

Stupid, impractical, ugly piece of rubbish. The urge hit her to throw it away, hurl it into the bushes. If it hadn't torn off in the fall –

Benny closed her hand around the earring. It wasn't the fault of a hunk of plastic that she'd been cut off from help.

She carefully lowered herself down the slope and pocketed the earring. On this expedition, the radio was in her wristband, safely snug against her flesh. 'Joseph,' she muttered.

'Can I be of assistance?' The porter's voice sounded weary.

Benny smiled.

'I need you to do a recce for me. Just float around the area a bit and see if you find anything.'

'As you wish.'

'I'll continue to check in every two hours. Give me a bell if you spot anything.'

'Very good.'

That ought to keep him happy. Joseph's natural habitat was her bedside table at the Braxiatel Collection. This was quite an expedition for him – it was only fair that he got a chance to see a bit of the landscape.

After a few hours, the rhythm had become completely instinctive. Grab hold of the grass, or some roots, or whatever. Haul herself forwards, her legs a dead weight behind her, pounding inside their foam splint like two bottles of buzzing pain. Stop. Rest, panting, her

cheek pressed against the grass. Repeat.

She arched her back, looked backwards to the base of the cliff, squinting against the late morning sunlight. Thirty metres, perhaps, in three hours. She was going to have to stop soon, crawl under something to get out of the noon sun.

She could hear a small creek, somewhere ahead. Good –

handy water, plus it was likely it would lead her back up the side of the mountain. Bad – it might get in her way. She might be a mermaid now, legs fused into a misshapen tail of foam, but she still didn't fancy a swim. And the creek might just lead to waterfalls, slippery rock faces she'd never have been able to climb even with all her limbs at her disposal.

There would be giant ferns near the creek, hugging the bank greedily. She'd aim for their shade.

She reached out for a thick tree root, fingers scrabbling for purchase, and got a grip.

She had made a good map of the area on top of the plateau, but she'd only really glimpsed the valley floor. Thin creeks poured down all over the high sides of the miniature mountain. Somewhere, there must be a way up that even a mermaid could negotiate, a slope gentle enough to allow her to haul herself up.

How long could she survive without setting the femur?

The medical scanner was being less than forthcoming on that point. There was no damage to the femoral artery – otherwise she wouldn't be here, lying against one of the giant white puffballs, peering into the scanner's screen. She had started first aid fast enough to prevent serious damage to the surrounding tissue, or catastrophic blood loss, and the splint was keeping things in place.

But once, as she had pulled herself over one of the fist-sized fungi, she had heard the ends of the fracture grating together, like chalk down the world's largest blackboard. The more she moved, the more damage she was doing, the sharp edges of the broken bone working their way into the surrounding muscle. Edging closer to the big blood vessels.

Long before she ran out of food or water, she would run out of painkillers. Then she would run out of the patches that handled the bleeding. After that she probably only had hours.

Benny lay back in the spiky grass, doing the maths in her head. If she could stand to keep moving once the pain started again, she had three days to find a way back to the top of the plateau, and drag herself up there.

Two hours later, as Capella A seared the landscape with yellowed light, she crawled underneath the leaves of a giant fern, breathing the smell of water. She drank two litres of the clean fresh stuff, checked

herself with the medical scanner, eyed the sun through the foliage, and decided it was safe to take a nap.

The nap lasted twenty-four hours, during which something very strange happened.

Benny lay in her camp bed, eyes wide open. Overhead, the stars burned fiercely in the empty sky. If she was a little further south, she could be watching the spectacular aurora, Capella's gushing radiation turning to ribbons of light in the little planet's magnetic field. A healthy ozone layer kept the planet snug, but one theory about its unimaginative stock of lifeforms was that, with the levels of radiation still getting through, the local DNA was jealously guarded by repair enzymes that left little room for mutations, good or bad.

Joseph was back in the landing pod. Despite spending much of the day patrolling the area, he hadn't found anything out of the ordinary. His systems had played up once or twice in odd ways, though, so she'd cut short his travels and sent him back to do a self-diagnostic.

Beneath her bed, the miniature nightcrawlers and the lesser nightcrawlers were wandering around through the leaf litter, making a constant tiny sound like someone eating cornflakes. They were harmless little horrors; the smooth metal legs of the bed were an adequate defence.

She had set up a ring of proximity detectors around the camp. There were thirty-seven species of nightcrawlers, all of them nocturnal. Most of them smaller than a breadbox. But not all. The prox detectors would emit a high-pitched whistle if anything too large for comfort got near, alerting her and scaring the creepy-crawly away.

The larger species of nightcrawlers seemed to be staying clear of her camp of their own accord. She could hear them when they came close, armoured legs and feet pushing through the ferns. Sometimes there was an almighty crunching sound – probably a big crawler eating a little crawler. Sometimes, the sound of one of the arboreal species doing the rounds in the treetops.

In her years as an archaeologist, she had slept through worse sounds than this – fighting predators, nearby gunfire, frantic shagging in the adjoining tent.

It was another noise entirely that was keeping her awake.

Benny lay still in the camp bed, like someone sure there's a burglar in the hallway. She was holding her breath, straining to listen, to sort through the night sounds and pick out the one sound that was nibbling at her mind.

Her rucksack was on the end of the bed, between her feet.

Slowly, she sat up, reaching down to grab the bag. Trying to look casual as she did it, turning her head for a quick, nonchalant glance

around the area.

The prox detectors were small pools of light, forming a rough oval around the bed, about twenty metres across. She could see the tiny arachnoids as they flickered around in the fallen leaves. Beyond the pale lights was solid blackness.

She took out her palmtop. A panel in the side slid back, and the ear bead dropped out on to her lap. Cursing silently, she grabbed at it before it could roll into the hairy-legged traffic beneath the bed.

She pushed the bead into place in her ear and started up the palmtop's recording program. Her left ear was suddenly full of the amplified, sharpened sounds of the night.

Diagrams unfolded on the screen, showing the components of the noise, analysing and refining.

Benny glanced around, automatically. The proximity detectors should give her plenty of warning of an approach.

But the itchy feeling of being watched made it hard to concentrate on the screen, to keep her eyes off the darkness.

Her fingers moved silently on the palmtop's controls as she adjusted the sound components. First she removed the constant background of flowing water and creatures on the ground. There – now all she could hear, in her left ear, was the larger animals moving around in the distance.

One by one, she picked out the creatures and removed the sound of their movements. There, a beastie in a tree, legs scraping on the bark. There, something splashing around in the creek. One by one, the palmtop filtered them out, until there was a single sound left.

Benny's heart hammered. There it was, the thing she had been certain she could hear.

Footsteps.

Someone pacing back and forth, their feet crackling quietly in the leaf litter.

Benny slowly turned the palmtop, trying not to make any sudden moves. The footsteps were coming from somewhere to her left. There – probably five metres beyond the prox detectors. Close enough to get a look at her, far away enough to stay hidden.

The footsteps stopped. Benny couldn't help herself. She turned to stare into the night, at the exact spot where someone must be standing, staring back at her.

With a yelp of panic, Benny ripped the flaregun out of the rucksack and fired it into the air.

There was an immense flash of light, high overhead, turning the clearing into a black-and-white snapshot. A thousand spiders froze in place, their button-eyes flashing with reflected light.

Benny stared. The clearing was empty. There was no one there.

They came to rescue her, flashlights shining through the double-shadowed evening, her name echoing in shouts across the landscape.

They parachuted down, landing a few feet away, trailing silk as they reached for her with gloved hands.

Jeffery Mqhayi, hero of Danger on the Frontier, came to rescue her. A small blue plastic hippo attacked as he carried her to safety, tearing his clothes to reveal well-developed muscles.

She showered in a glass cubicle, dirt and blood swinging down the drain.

She was sitting on a balcony overlooking the sea, spooning sherbet from a glass bowl, glad she had decided to go on hols instead of flying out to Capella Four.

She shouted into her earring from the bottom of the cliff, while a professional phone voice said soothing, inaudible things.

She was tucked safely into bed with her doll, Rebecca, but she didn't dare open her eyes, because what if she saw a pair of eyes through the window, watching her?

Bernice opened her eyes with a start, and let out a long, painful moan.

She was lying face down in the dust. Her legs throbbed, feeling huge and raw. Her mouth felt shrivelled and fuzzy.

Alone, alone.

She filled her canteen from the stream, awkwardly, stretching and leaning to dip it into the flowing water. It took three goes to stop the thirst that was scraping at her throat. She splashed water on her face, ran it through her hair, leaving dirty trails down her neck.

Her thigh and calf hurt, but it was more of a deep, dull ache than the pounding pain she had staved off with the derms. She struggled into a half-sitting position, and tiredly rummaged in her rucksack for the medical scanner.

She checked it three times before she quite believed it. Her broken bones had been set.

There they were on the screen, the fractures quite clearly visible, neatly joined together and presumably quietly knitting away. She wiggled her toes, experimentally. No problems with nerves or circulation. It looked like the splint had done a good job.

It was obviously a lot more sophisticated than she had realised. When enough time had passed, and its mini-computer realised help wasn't close, the automatic splint had completed the job it had begun by putting her legs back together. While she had been unconscious, it had quietly gone to work. Or perhaps the damage done by her efforts to move around had prompted it. Maybe it had just been waiting for her to hold still? Either way, she wasn't sorry to have missed the fun.

Benny tucked away the medical scanner. This made a huge

difference. She could cut down on the painkillers and the anti-shock drugs, stretch out her supply. She rolled over, awkwardly, and tried dragging herself just a couple of feet.

Yes – even without a derm, the pain was bearable.

She had a chance now, a real chance to make it back to the pod. When she got back to civilisation, she was going to track down whoever had invented the automatic splint and plant a big wet kiss on them.

Benny sat cross-legged on her camp bed in the hot dawn light and played the night recording back over and over, groggy and grumpy as she listened to the ghostly footsteps.

Walking... stopping... then her shout, and the sharp burst of the flare gun. And then nothing, for a long time, except for the odd curse.

It must have been her imagination, working on the sound of some unexpected species of nightcrawler.

Right. A nightcrawler that wore thick-soled boots.

She felt better after a couple of shots of Irish coffee. Today she had another six squares of the map to cover, hiking over the easy terrain, having a picnic lunch in the shadow of a cluster of trees or one of the rock faces.

Benny made a sour face as she packed her rucksack. She hadn't realised how much she'd looked forward to the solitude. Not just the chance to make up for one of the classic bungles of her life, but to get away from the routine, from admin and academia and the troubles and questions of the Collection staff. Her intruder – real or imagined – was spoiling that.

The walking did her good. The clear sky and dry air made a refreshing change from the refiltered, artificial atmosphere she'd got used to. She hiked for hours, drinking cool water from her canteen, marking off areas on the palmtop map.

During the long Capellan day, the nightcrawlers went back to their lairs. The little ones simply drilled down into the soil; occasionally her boots disturbed them, little black bodies scurrying and digging their way back to safety. The big ones had burrows or caves to hide in, keeping out of the double sun.

When Capella A and B were overhead, Benny found herself a patch of shade and sat down to open her packages of pate and crackers.

A warm breeze blew through the clearing where she sat, her back to a cool wall of stone. The only sound was its gentle movement in the leaves, the low-gravity trees swaying at the tips, the large ferns rippling like a greeny-blue ocean.

No insects, no birds. No people. A wide ocean of space separated her from the nearest human beings. She was surrounded by millions of

kilometres of emptiness.

‘Excuse me.’

‘Yaaaaaargh!’ said Benny, in a spray of cracker crumbs.

‘Apologies,’ sniffed Joseph. ‘Since you were in the vicinity, I wanted to report in person.’

‘Report what?’

‘I have scanned for the sound of footsteps, as you requested, without success.’

Benny made a face. ‘You’d better rack off back to the pod, then. I don’t want to risk losing you out here if your systems go funny again.’

Joseph hovered away, with a dignified air.

Benny’s map was filling up with red squares, the areas she had already searched. She frowned at the screen, jamming her little finger into the pate package to get at the last bits of it. Those rock paintings were around here somewhere, but she was running out of places to look.

Bernice slept, her battered body sheltered from the wind by thick walls of ferns. The tiny nightcrawlers danced around her, avoiding the glare and the heat of the twin fires she had lit in her little niche. One at her feet, one at her head, creating an oval space of safety.

Bernice twitched in her sleep. Someone kept running their hand over her shoulder, over and over. Fingers danced across her face, making her want to sneeze. She tried to call out Jeffery Mqhayi’s name, but nothing came out.

Bernice awoke with a shock to discover a giant spider on her head.

She emitted a stream of oaths which propelled the beastie across the valley floor. It boggled at her with half a dozen eyes, and scampered to safety across the bulge of a huge fungus.

She sat up, painfully, and twisted her body, trying to look around. There were more of the oversized nightcrawlers hovering nervously around. Examples of the large and giant species, she judged. As she made eye contact, they scuttled off into the ferns like naughty children.

Her shoulder stung. Oh Goddess, had it bitten her? She felt light-headed. Was it just panic?

Bernice made herself hold her breath for ten seconds, then fought to keep her breathing even while she investigated the shoulder. She had scraped it badly that afternoon, squeezing between a tree trunk and a rock. She was running low on the healing gel, and had decided to let the abrasion be.

There were small rasps all around the wound. Ugh, it had been licking her!

Sparkling eyes watched her from the darkness. They must have

smelled the blood. The little devils probably had six noses, too.

What did they normally live on? Each other, she supposed.

Like one of those joke drawings of a little fish about to be eaten by a bigger fish which is about to be eaten by an even bigger fish.

Bernice measured out a fingertip's worth of the gel and rubbed it deliberately into the wound, wincing at the sharp sting. She didn't fancy any more tap-dances on her anatomy tonight, thank you very much.

She spent the next day inching her way around the base of the plateau, looking for a way up. Each time she found a promising slope, she tried dragging herself up, using the ferns for hand-holds. It wasn't too difficult: the tough little plants could bear her weight, and the foam splint barely added anything to that.

But each time, she just ran out of slope. They were the areas at the base of the miniature plateau where loose soil and rock had cascaded down. Three times in a row she ran into a rocky cliff, too sheer to climb with only her arms to rely on. The splint wouldn't even let her push with her feet.

With the painkiller supply running low, she wouldn't have been keen to try it anyway.

At last she dragged herself into the shade by the water, spent, too tired even to wash the dust out of her hair.

She had lunched on fern shoots, prying their soft roots out of the soil with a stick whittled to sharpness with her penknife. After lunch, she had spent a frantic two minutes searching for the little blade, after putting it down for a moment amongst the leaf litter.

Fern salad was a lot of effort for not much result. The slender shoots were no bigger than her little finger. Still, at least they were edible, and not too tough or bitter.

The spiders were probably thinking exactly the same thing about her.

She glanced around. The double sun was sinking, forked shadows stretched over everything. She was covered in small cuts and abrasions. There would be little eyes watching her in the darkness, waiting for her to fall asleep. Little noses... smelling.

That evening she made her fire from the twigs she gathered during the day, picking them up as she crawled, and shoving them into her rucksack. This time, she put aside a few of the thicker twigs. Once the flames were crackling, she went to work on them with the knife, scraping its edge along a stone to keep it keen.

Then she lay down on her side, her collection of stakes within arm's reach, one of the twigs clutched in her hand.

It took everything she had not to fall asleep at once.

Sometimes in exceptionally tedious lectures at the military

academy, she literally had not been able to keep her eyes open, her head rolling forward as she fought to keep her lids apart.

Fortunately, every tiny noise in the night snapped her out of her drowsiness, over and over.

Finally she heard the patter of tiny feet. A nightcrawler bigger than her hand scooted out of the undergrowth, dancing sideways across her field of vision.

Remember, she told herself, you're dead from the waist down. It'll be gone by the time you twist over or sit up. You have to get it from this angle, or not at all.

One of the little buggers walked up her back.

Bernice stiffened, holding her breath, as it wandered down her arm. She felt a cool tongue rasp against one of her cuts.

With a roar, she jerked away, stabbing down blindly with the stick and narrowly avoiding rolling into her own fire. She heard a whispering noise – dozens of the little creatures legging it into the undergrowth. She realised she had jammed her eyes shut.

She opened them. She had managed to miss her arm.

She'd staked the nightcrawler right through its carapace, nailing it to the ground. It hung there, halfway up her pointed stick, looking pathetic.

Bernice clapped her hands. 'Suppertime!'

It only took a few minutes to get the fire crackling again, and shove the arachnoid in for a couple of minutes, still on its stick like a marshmallow being toasted. It made a dreadful, oily smell as its hairs and feelers burnt off.

'Looks about done to me,' said Bernice. She used her knife and another sharpened stick to crack the exoskeleton. The bulk of the meat was in the limbs, smoking tubes crammed with steaming alien flesh.

The medical scanner still insisted it was safe to eat. So no way out there, then. Bernice scraped out a lump of the stuff, took a deep breath, and pushed it into her mouth.

In years to come, she would often recount the horrors of her expedition to Capella Four. At that point in the story, people usually volunteered to buy her another drink.

What she never told people – no matter how much she drank – was that cooked nightcrawler had the flavour and texture of tinned crabmeat.

Benny sat on the bed, in the centre of her circle of light, her palmtop held in her lap.

She had set it to detect the sound from last night. She had broken out the spare cameras as well, and attached them to three of the prox detectors. If something triggered the detectors, it would trigger the

cameras as well. At least she might get a look at her mysterious companion.

Had they watched her as she cabled the devices together?

Did they understand what she was doing? Did it seem like magic to them, or was it primitive gadgetry, no barrier at all if they wanted to slip inside the circle when she was asleep?

Benny glanced around at the lowering darkness. It was a lot more likely that she had come across some new form of Capellan life. That would be a worthwhile discovery in itself, she thought, although the life sciences really weren't her cuppa.

A light flashed on her palmtop. Benny stared at the screen.

The sound was back.

The palmtop estimated fifty metres distance, roughly south of her campsite. Whatever it was, it was coming to have another look at her.

She stared into the dark grey, wishing she had night goggles, or an IR scanner, or even a really powerful torch.

She felt so exposed in the centre of her circle of lights. So obvious, like a neon sign, a beacon for interested alien monsters to come and take a shufti at.

Monsters were one thing. She was used to monsters, she could deal with monsters. A noise in the darkness, with nothing attached to it, was another.

Something intangible? No – those were boots she could hear crunching leaves. Heavy feet, at the very least.

Something invisible? Was that possible? Had it been watching her even as the flare light filled the clearing, calm in the knowledge that it could never be seen?

According to the palmtop, the footsteps were approaching. She couldn't make them out from the background noise, but the computer knew they were there, and when she plugged the bead into her ear, she could hear them loud and clear. One of the cameras was on that side, ready to record in visible light and infrared if anything got within two metres of it.

But the footsteps stopped about ten metres away.

Benny got up from the bed.

She stood just inside the rim of the prox detectors, between two pools of light, staring out at the spot where her palmtop said the footsteps had stopped. She wanted them to know she knew they were there, and that she was ready to deal with them.

Oh, for a floodlight!

The footsteps started to move. She followed them with the palmtop, as they moved in a slow arc around the outside of her campsite, always keeping well back in the shadows.

They paused again. She stared out at them. Presumably, they stared

back at her.

It was as though the light, the chance of being seen, was the only thing keeping them away.

She waited for the footsteps to start up again, for her watcher to move. They didn't move, didn't continue their circuit of her camp, didn't walk away.

After a while, Benny went back to the bed. She took the flaregun out of her rucksack. There were still two flares left, meant to be used in an emergency to signal a shuttle from the transport ship.

Benny leaned forward, the palmtop in her lap, the flaregun held loosely in her hand. She had a bright light, and she wasn't afraid to use it.

The footsteps never moved. She sat that way until dawn.

And when the first Capella came over the horizon, and she looked, there was no-one there.

The diet of nightcrawler flesh and tender fern shoots didn't seem to be doing her any harm. Not yet. The medical scanner warned that the alien foods only contained about half of the amino acids she needed, and none of the vitamins.

Weird. She could starve to death here, surrounded by edible and even tasty food.

The dreams were starting to die down. Now she was just as likely to have a vivid nightmare about Thousand Island Dressing as about Danger on the Frontier.

'Should have thought to bring some sauce for the nightcrawlers,' she told herself. 'I know – mayonnaise. As delicious on baked spider as it is on fresh fern. And some salt. Onion salt, I think.'

Should have thought to bring some more painkillers.

She had been rationing her supply, carefully. So long as she held still, her legs barely bothered her. Her drag-and-rest, drag-and-rest movement produced a constant, hypnotic haze of pain, grinding away at her strength. She was spending longer and longer spells just lying there, breathing heavily, wondering if it would really matter if she paused for just another five minutes, just another ten minutes.

She had been rationing her reading material as well. When she was too tired to keep moving, once she had got the two fires lit, she would carefully turn over a few pages of Edward Watkinson's *Glory Under the Mud*.

'All your fault, Eddie,' she murmured, carefully pulling the book out of her battered rucksack. She was up to page 137, second paragraph. 'If it wasn't for all your stories about lost cities and occult artefacts, I wouldn't be out here now. What do you have to say to that?'

The wise traveller is prepared for all sorts of eventualities– a

loose button, lost luggage, a broken limb, falling in love The archaeologist is prepared for anything, because the past, like the future, may contain anything. There are a limited number of unexpected events that our traveller might encounter, but the archaeologist could discover anything. Even with a good knowledge of the site and of the civilisation under investigation, the archaeologist is prepared to be shocked. Shock is rare – most archaeological work is slow, steady, even dull – but it is always around the corner.

Benny let her head hang down, hair brushing the pages of the book.

In those first moments after the fall, her body and mind had been gripped by the overwhelming terror of death, the absolute cold knowledge that yes, you are in danger, something terrible could happen to you, right here and now.

That initial panic had filled the universe. When the drugs in the anti-shock derm kicked in, it diminished to nothing, replaced by a warming sense of relief.

It was back now, as she lay in the dust between two flickering fires, the occasional miniature nightcrawler wandering across her back.

She had been thinking of the fall as an obstacle to overcome. A problem to solve. Calculating how to ration her food, her drugs; finding food and water; keeping the bugs off; seeking the way back to her landing pod and help and safety.

Now she was starting to see the lack of light at the end of the tunnel.

She had been imagining herself boasting about her extraordinary experience on Capella Four. How her resourcefulness and determination had kept a promising young archaeologist alive, stopped her brilliant career from going bung.

Now a different image kept coming into her mind. The rescue team finding a huddled body amongst the riverside plants, shrivelled inside the bulk of a foam splint. Or worse, nibbled away by a thousand tiny jaws. The items from her rucksack laid out and totalled up for the report. The terse message back to her sponsors, letting them know of her failure.

Maybe she would come across the rock paintings. She could use her own corpse to mark them. When they found her, they'd find her discovery. She could still get the credit posthumously.

Unless the photo was a hoax? The explorer's last little joke, a faked photograph to send young and naive would-be archaeologists off on wild goose chases?

No. Surely not. What would be the point?

If she was lucky, if she found the paintings in her long, slow crawl

across the landscape, she'd decide. She'd look at the scanner, check her supplies, and make up her mind whether to continue, or whether to stay with her find. A pointer, a mark in the landscape.

It would be better than being eaten by bugs for nothing.

Very slowly, Bernice looked up from her book.

A nightcrawler the size of a Volkswagen was crouched not ten metres away.

Languidly, the creature blinked all six of its eyes. Its slow gaze was fixed on her. It was so big she hadn't even seen it.

Alternatively, she thought, the rescue team might not find anything but a couple of chewed bones. And a lot of chewed splint foam.

With an effortless leap, the nightcrawler sprang into the air. Benny stared, rolling to follow its smooth flying arc.

It landed behind her on the cliff face, dislodging pebbles and sending down a shower of loose soil. It must have jumped ten metres, effortlessly.

The arachnoid turned, huge limbs shadowing the rock, six orbs staring down at her like the eyes of a tremendous idol.

Benny swallowed.

A thick thread arced from between the nightcrawler's hind legs. The ropy stuff shot up the side of the cliff. Benny could see spinerettes as thick as her arms, working furiously. The thread tangled itself amongst the ferns and fungi at the top of the plateau. The gigantic nightcrawler tugged on the thread, leaning its body forward, as though testing it.

Then it shot up the cliff face, backwards, legs whirling as if it was reeling the thread inside itself. It disappeared out of view at the top.

Bernice couldn't help it. She started to laugh. She whooped with laughter. She choked with laughter. She laughed until her stomach hurt and her mouth was full of dust.

Benny froze. Someone had just run through the trees.

She exploded into action. 'Come back here, you!' she hollered, rucksack scattering stuff in all directions as she scrambled to her feet and set off in hot pursuit.

She had been eating lunch, lying against one of the giant fungi while she speared fruit salad with her fork. Half-doing, really, enjoying the dappled shadows, the warm breeze.

They must have been watching her. Following her, perhaps, as she continued her increasingly pessimistic search for the rock paintings.

Her boots crunched through grass and ferns as she stumbled through the forest. She stopped, staring around through the narrow trees. There! A flash of movement, soundless and sudden. She took off after it.

There was someone else here. There had always been someone else here – it explained everything. All the scans and the surveys had been wrong. Perhaps the natives had been hidden somehow, shielded. Or perhaps there was only a single inhabitant, a guardian left behind by the Aurigans.

They had given themselves away now. She would establish contact. She would demand explanations. All would be revealed.

Benny burst from the trees and hurtled to a stop.

She was standing in front of a cliff face, perhaps twenty metres from the rock. It was a stubby plateau, rising sharply from the plain, casting its shadow on to the forest in the afternoon sunlight.

The cliff face was covered with painted figures. They all seemed to be in motion, rushing from left to right.

Benny was struck by a strong sense of *deja vu*. The site looked just like it did in the old photo, just as she'd imagined it. It was as though she had been here already.

She let out an almighty whoop of triumph. 'Wahey!' She hurled her hat into the air.

The shout echoed back at her from the cliff face, and from all around. She spun on the spot, her hat tumbling to the ground, forgotten, as she tried to make out the figure she had seen darting through the trees.

Nothing. She was alone. Her eyes were drawn back to the rock, irresistibly. The figures were rich with colour missing from the photograph, brick red, vermillion, a deep metallic blue, filling in sharp black or white outlines.

She looked around again, cautiously stepping towards the rock. Her holocamera was still around her neck, thank the Goddess, not abandoned in her headlong pursuit.

She would make a series of recordings right now, and then return in the morning with a kit to take some samples of stone and paint. She'd dig at the base of the cliff, looking for anything left behind by the artists, bits of pottery or metal or bone, charcoal from campfires.

Wait. Benny put down her camera and pulled out her palmtop. The map sprang to life, automatically adjusting as it scanned the area to show her which search square she was standing in.

The square was marked red. The sense of *deja vu* hadn't been from the photo. She had already checked this cliff face.

Benny sat down on the grass, gazing up at the paintings.

They simply had not been here when she'd looked before.

Who was playing silly buggers with her? Why hide the paintings from her, and then suddenly show them like this?

Or was it something simpler, some natural phenomenon – something to do with the double star? Exotic pigments that were only

visible in the noon light?

She gripped the holocamera, and started taking image after image. She couldn't stop now. She couldn't look away.

The next time she looked, the images might be gone again.

On my last legs! Haa ha ah aha haa ha!

All last night I stayed awake.

All last night I cut myself with the knife. I had to experiment to find out how big to make the cuts. The blood has to be flowing, actually moving across my skin before they can smell it. One drop, two drops.

All last night I tore the leaves off the ferns.

There aren't any more pills or patches. I've got to lie still.

Don't move, or they'll see me. I can feel them crawling on me, crawling over my skin. Smelling. They don't smell one another! I tried that, I triedy-tried that. I smeared them all around, but it didn't work, it made them scared.

All last night I tore the fern leaves into strips. Slitting them with the tip of the knife, when it wasn't needed for other duties.

I know they're watching me, waiting for me.

All last night I twisted the strips together. Like plaiting a little girl's hair. Like plaiting my dolly's hair. Like plaiting Rebecca's hair. Sit still, Miss Rebecca, be a good girl while I plait you and plait you, while the tough strips of plant fibre scrape my hands raw.

Same as the day before that, and the night before that.

I have to show them I'm a good little girl, like Miss Rebecca. Sit up straight. Don't fidget. Get yourself out of it, get yourself out of it, you got yourself in and now you can get yourself out. You deserve it, you deserve it, you deserve it.

Can they smell my hands? I wonder if they can smell the raw flesh of my hands.

I'm going to be a nightcrawler. I'm going to be one! Are you listening? I know you can hear me! My voice carries for miles! Miles and miles! Are you listening? I'm a nightcrawler too! I am!

Benny yawned and stretched inside her sleeping bag, her toes pushing against the tough fabric. She folded her arms behind her head. Above, the sky was already heating up, pale blue-white.

As soon as she had got back to the pod, she had uploaded all her recordings and maps, sending them across space via the system of relay beacons. 'This time,' she had told Joseph, 'if I fall off a cliff or a giant nightcrawler lands on me, at least the rest of the world will have proof that the Aurigans existed.'

It was her own instinct that had led her to the paintings, of course. Out here in the emptiness, with her senses keyed up to 200 percent, her own intuition had projected itself onto the landscape, leading her

back to the right place at the right time. It would make an interesting story to tell at seminars or over drinks in the Caretaker's Cottage.

Benny rolled over, yawning.

Seated comfortably atop the round ball of an immense fungus was an angular creature. It was quietly smoking a herbal cigarette, limbs folded inside a loose sort of jacket, watching her from beneath the rim of its hat.

Benny did a quadruple-take, contorting into extraordinary shapes as she tried to get free of the sleeping bag, before remembering that her trousers were hanging over a bush.

'Good morning,' said the figure, in a puff of blue smoke. It was half-hidden by the lazy swirls. The smell of cloves reached her across the stretch of spiky grass between them.

Intentions, thought Benny, probably non-hostile. Species and gender uncertain. 'Good morning,' she returned, jumping to her feet with the sleeping bag hitched up around her waist. She hopped sideways, keeping her eyes on the figure, reaching out for her chinos. That was you, yesterday, wasn't it?

'Of course.' The figure seemed odd, as though some of its details were missing. No matter how she peered through the smoke, she couldn't quite make it out. Stylised, she thought, doing a quick switcheroo with the sleeping bag and her pants. The smell of whatever it was smoking was irritatingly familiar.

Benny sat down on her sleeping bag, matching the figure's cross-legged position. 'Do you live here?' she asked. 'Or are you a visitor, like me? You must tell me if I'm trespassing on your property, or if there are places I shouldn't go. Or if you found the paintings first, then they're your discovery. I'll make sure you get the credit.'

The figure was shaking its head. 'We agreed to make contact. This time,' it said, stretching out a long hand, 'we were sure of your motives.'

'Oh my Goddess,' said Benny. 'You were there. When I was here. I mean, two decades ago. On my first expedition.' The figure remained silent, its cigarette trailing a long plume of blue. 'Did you set my legs?'

'There were instructions in your computer,' said the figure.

'But why didn't you – make contact?' Benny raked at her hair with her fingers. 'You saved my life. But then you let me drag myself all over the landscape.' She forced herself to stay sitting, but she couldn't keep the sudden anger out of her voice. 'Why? Why didn't you help me? Why did you leave me to crawl up the side of a mountain?'

'Our ability to interface is limited,' said the figure. It tugged the brim of its hat down. 'We read your computer. In the end, we read your communications device.'

'You signalled the rescue team,' said Benny. She felt her shoulders

droop. 'I'm sorry... it was bad. Goddess, it was so bad.'

'Yes,' said the figure. 'This time you're not in such a hurry. Not a clamour for fame, a rush to prove yourself.'

'The paintings are beautiful,' she said simply. 'I want everyone to have a chance to see them.' She knew, as she said it, that it was the truth. The figure was smiling. 'But they're not just paintings,' she said. 'Are they?'

The figure tilted its head. She still couldn't make out the face beneath the brim. 'When our ancestors painted the rocks,' it said, 'they weren't adding images to the surface. They were bringing out images, spirits deep within the stone.'

Benny nodded. 'I've studied that concept in several cultures.'

'When we left,' said the figure, 'we followed their example.'

'The stone,' said Benny. 'It's a storage medium. The paintings are an interface, just the surface.'

'There are more,' said the figure. 'Scattered about. You'll find the clues in the paintings. Here,' it said, and jabbed its cigarette at the sky. 'And elsewhere.'

'You didn't come from here,' said Benny. 'From this planet.'

'No.' The figure took a long drag on its cigarette. 'We chose it because it's inhospitable, inaccessible. But not too inaccessible.' The grin flashed around the cigarette. 'You can find us, if you're looking hard enough.'

'Why did you leave?' said Benny. 'Where did you go?'

'It's all there,' said the figure. He gestured in the direction of the cliffs, sending up curlicues of smoke. 'All in there.'

'I'm not a computer expert,' said Benny. 'I won't be able to read the records you've left behind.'

'Not by yourself,' said the figure.

Benny's wristband came to life. 'I'm putting a communication through,' Joseph announced loudly. 'It's from the International Klein Blue. They've received your recordings, and want to talk about sending down a full team to investigate. With your authority, of course. One moment.'

The band went dead as Joseph fiddled with the comlink.

Benny looked up. 'Do you want to talk to -'

But the figure was gone.

Bernice could hear shouting, loud enough to disturb her sleep.

'Don't touch me! Don't lift me up!'

'Relax!'

'Don't lift me up!'

'Take it easy. Give her a couple more derms, she needs them.'

A soft warmth spread through Bernice's body. She felt it washing

into her heavy arms, into her face and feet.

‘Look at this,’ someone said.

‘That can’t be right,’ said a second voice. ‘Look at that femur.’

‘There’s someone else around,’ said the first voice. ‘A medic, by the look of this work.’

‘They must have sent the distress call,’ said someone else, nearby. ‘But why just leave her here, then?’

‘Get a search team down here,’ said the first voice. ‘We’re looking for a second body.’

‘She’s trying to speak.’

‘What is it, sweetheart? Relax, we’re just getting the splint off now.’ There was a hissing noise, and then a sudden coolness on her skin, a sudden pressure lifted from her body.

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘Nobody here but us nightcrawlers,’ said Bernice.

They helped her sit up. Someone was cleaning her legs, slicing away the ragged cloth of her trousers and daubing the skin underneath with a wet washcloth. The smell of antiseptis made her stomach turn over.

She had only managed to crawl about five metres from the edge of the cliff. She turned, her head spinning as the new drugs kicked in. The landing pod was still a good twenty metres away.

One of the medics, his green uniform marked with the usual red spot, was hauling her rope up the cliff.

She watched it, proud, proud. It was a good, tough rope.

Dozens of giant fern leaves had died to make it.

She had pulled herself up, using the plants for hand holds, to the highest point she could reach before the rocky cliff intervened. Then she had spent half an hour spinning and hurling the rope, a rock tied into its end to create a bolo. At last it had arced high and wrapped itself tightly around a fern near the top of the cliff.

Bernice had hauled herself up, the muscles in her arms protesting but doing their job, until she reached a ledge. She had spent a night on that ledge, recovering. The next morning she had taken hold of the rope again and pulled and tugged and hauled, hand over hand, the rock face bruising and cutting her arms, the sweat pouring into her eyes as she crawled up and up.

She had a vague memory of clambering over the very top, her fingernails shredding as she fought to keep a grip, to pull the dead weight of her legs that last couple of metres.

On the rescue ship, they gave her a thorough check-up.

She needed rehydration, half a dozen nutritional derms, treatment for scores of abrasions and lacerations, stimulants to help the bones knit more efficiently, and a haircut.

They insisted the splint couldn’t have set her bones. There were

models sophisticated enough to do it, if you hooked them to a medical scanner and a laser-sighting system. Hers was just a basic first aid model, which assumed medical help was available within twelve hours.

If there was someone else on the planet, the search team never found them.

Benny was waiting for the research crew by the rock paintings. She was leaning against a tree, the faded photograph in her hand. That long-dead traveller must have taken the picture from this very spot.

Soon the picture would be part of the Braxiatel Collection – along with whatever the researchers could glean about the Aurigans from the crystalline computer records they had left behind.

There was a new figure amongst the rush of creatures across the rock face. Benny stepped up to it as she heard the team's small craft landing softly on the plateau above.

Joseph was buzzing about, fussing. 'Vandalism,' he pronounced.

'No,' said Benny. 'They were designed to do this. They're meant to respond to whoever finds them.'

The new figure was her height, a sketch in black of a humanoid figure, face partly hidden by something on its head. One hand was raised in a mysterious gesture, something held in the fingers. The other was reaching out, towards the viewer, as though to take whatever it could grasp.

She could stay, take charge of the recovery team, get her name first on all the papers. It was her discovery, after all.

But she didn't fancy bossing around a bunch of programmers whose work she didn't understand. There was nothing more frustrating than having someone in admin in charge of your project.

'How will you explain it to them?' sniffed Joseph.

Benny broke into a grin. 'I won't,' she said. She reached out and brushed her fingers against the painted hand. 'Let'em work that one out for themselves.'

For these last few moments, she was still the only human being on the entire planet. But not alone, not alone.

Phew. There are points during my telling of that story where the arachnophobes in my audience start twitching and flicking imaginary things off their shoulders. Hmm. Maybe I should have said that in the previous link. Oh well, too late now. You can try to sue me, arachnophobes, if you feel I've put you through unnecessary suffering, but bear in mind that I have very little money. I've been told that my advance for this book has largely gone towards paying off Mr Plurk and Mr Scozz. I've tried pointing out to them that this actually makes me their employer, but they seem untutoured in such technicalities. At least they're doing the

washing up, which mollifies me somewhat, as they'll find it to be one of the most dangerous and difficult enterprises they've ever undertaken, judging by the crashes coming from my kitchen, I may have to accept a few casualties.

It's quite fun, trawling through what other people have made of my adventures. But one does come across oddities. The number of different hairstyles I've been given. And whatever anyone says, or has downloaded, I would never pose for any sort of centrefold. And just recently, a lot of people have been speculating that there's something going on between me and Irving Braxiatel. Well, honestly. Let me set the record straight here and now. Brax is... well, no, he's not a good friend, exactly. Sometimes he's as annoying as my former husband Jason was. And in almost exactly the same way. Except that, while Jason was poor and powerless, Braxiatel has money and power.

So. Clad I could clear that up.

I was pleased to find, therefore, a story that portrays the relationship between myself and Jas... between myself and Mr Braxiatel, the way it really is, with the two of us as fellow academics, striding purposefully into the unknown hand-in... together. On a friendly basis.

3: The Light that Never Dies

By Eddie Robson

The human woman raised her staser pistol to Mrrct'llz's head, and fired. Mrrct'llz felt a huge burst of pain as his body lost all cohesion and was ripped into its most basic components. He was thankful when he died and the pain ended.

Unfortunately, a couple of days later, he died again. And again. And again. Eventually, he lost count of how many times it had happened. The period of consciousness that he was afforded each time – perhaps a minute, perhaps only thirty seconds – didn't allow for a great deal of thought. First there was the anticipation, the fear. He'd felt that the first time, but differently. The first time, it had been a terrible uncertainty. He didn't know whether the knowledge of how it would feel made it better or worse. Then there was the pain. Then there was nothing, until the fear started again.

After a while, it stopped happening. But he didn't know that. He was dead. At least, he was until the next time.

Bernice Summerfield had lived on a lot of planets in her time, but never an asteroid, as far as she could recall. She hadn't got used to it yet. It was the horizon that was irritating her, she'd decided. It looked wrong. You could actually see the curve, if you stared at it for long enough.

Bernice had time to do things like staring at the horizon at the moment. She was between projects, the Braxiatel Collection not really being up to speed on its academic commissions yet. Wanting to seem busy, waiting for inspiration to strike, she was engaged in some unspecified research' when anyone asked her. And she'd only been here a few weeks. She'd lapsed back into her old University habits, which involved getting up so late that she would invariably miss breakfast, then spending a couple of hours wondering whether it was too early to have lunch.

Hence, she was presently wondering whether or not to have lunch. She slumped on the sofa in her rooms and thought about this for fifteen minutes or so, staring all the while at the decor of her new home. It was best described as opulent', which Bernice wasn't really used to. The marble fireplace, the red silk on the walls, a rug so thick that Wolsey could get lost in it. The chandelier, for crying out loud.

Bernice was more accustomed to junk-shop furniture and carpets encrusted with chewing gum that had been compressed into some new

kind of fossil fuel. But she could get to like this.

In the end, she decided that she wasn't hungry, but she made some lunch anyway. Doing so gave her some small sense of achievement. Besides which, civilised people never attempted anything of importance before lunch.

The kitchen wasn't quite so plush as the rest of her rooms.

(Especially the bathroom, she thought. She'd always wanted a bath in the centre of the bathroom. Not against the wall.

Right in the centre. There was just something nicely decadent about it.) The kitchen did, however, have all the mod cons you could wish for. It did practically everything itself, although she still had to stick her own cheese on toast under the grill. Whilst she was waiting for that, she noticed that the corner of her Wacky Races poster had come unstuck.

Some rebellious streak in Bernice had made her put that up.

She liked the paintings in her study, and it was nice to have the original of 'The Hay Wain' next to her desk, but it was all a bit too tasteful.

She reached up and re-attached the corner of the poster to the wall.

After lunch, Bernice found herself once again at a loose end.

She needed something to do. What was she supposed to be doing around here, anyway? She didn't actually work here – her title was that of 'permanent guest' – but Irving had always hinted that he'd appreciate her help with certain areas of the Collection. He hadn't really elaborated.

Maybe she should ask him. Today. Before something came along.

She reached her arm out to the coffee table, attempting to reach the vid-phone. She couldn't quite do it. She made a mental note to move the sofa nearer to the coffee table. Or move the coffee table closer to the sofa. Either would be good. At the current distance, she had to place her other hand on the floor in order to reach, which she wasn't happy about at all. She pressed the 'on' button on the 'phone and gratefully returned to her original position on the sofa, putting her hand over her eyes as she did so.

'Network, call Braxiatel,' she told the 'phone. 'Please,' she added, unnecessarily.

The vid-phone made its little dialling noises, then waited for the call to be accepted.

Irving Braxiatel's head and shoulders appeared on the screen. He was sitting at a desk, going through some documents. He didn't look up. But Bernice didn't know that, because she still had her hand over her eyes. 'Hello, Irving Braxiatel speaking,' came his voice from the speaker.

‘Hi, honey,’ she said. Displays of affection threw him off, and Bernice enjoyed throwing him off. If nothing else, it helped to keep him at a pace she could match. ‘It’s me.’

‘Oh, Bernice. Hello,’ said Braxiatel.

‘Mmm.’

There was a brief silence.

‘Did you want something, Bernice?’

‘What’re you doing?’ asked Bernice, with what she was aware was a hint of neediness in her voice.

‘Checking some new acquisitions in the film library. Why?’

‘Don’t you have people to do that?’

‘Not yet. I didn’t have anything else to do, so I decided to do it myself.’

‘Oh,’ said Bernice. ‘You need any help?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Okay. Where are you?’

‘The film library,’ replied Braxiatel, after a slight pause. ‘I thought I just said that.’

‘Yes, I know you’re in the film library. Where is the film library?’

‘It’s marked on all the maps. I gave you a map of the Collection.’

‘Yes, but I don’t know where I left it. I could have a look – it’s probably on my bedroom floor somewhere.’

Braxiatel tutted. ‘No, don’t bother. I’ve seen your bedroom floor.’ He pressed a button on his terminal. ‘Network, send file MAP/003 and open.’ The image of him was replaced by a three-dimensional model of the Collection complex.

Bernice removed her hand from her eyes and turned her head to face the ‘phone.

‘Whereabouts is it?’ she asked.

‘Network,’ said Braxiatel, ‘highlight film library.’ With a little ding noise, a room in the complex turned yellow.

‘Uh-huh. And where am I?’

Braxiatel sighed. ‘Network, highlight Professor Summerfield’s rooms.’ The ding sounded again, and another section of the map lit up. Bernice studied the image.

‘Oh,’ she said, surprised. ‘It’s not that far, I suppose.’

‘So, can I expect to be graced with your presence?’ asked Braxiatel.

‘Yes, I think so,’ said Bernice. ‘If I can get my workload sorted out. Give me half an hour.’

Three-quarters of an hour later, Bernice strolled into the film library. The stroll quickly became a stumble as she looked around, since the sight of the room made her momentarily forget to exercise control over what her feet were doing.

She shouldn't really have been surprised. A lot of the Collection's storage rooms were massive, and necessarily so.

There was a lot of stuff to fit in. As well as the film library's main room, which was entirely filled with shelves, there were gantries and rooms leading off. A map just inside the door indicated that these were reading and screening rooms.

Looking up from the map, Bernice considered that there really were quite a lot of shelves. They formed endless corridors and reached up to a high ceiling, the surface of which she couldn't really see. All of them were empty. The room was predominantly black and grey, and the lighting was low. The room was a little cooler than the others in the Mansionhouse. Like the rest of the building, though, it smelled new.

Did Braxiatel really have enough film to fill this place? If so, she knew what she'd be spending her spare days doing from now on.

Braxiatel himself appeared, halfway along the aisle of shelves immediately in front of Bernice. He started walking.

It took him more than a minute to actually reach her.

'What do you think?' he asked.

'I hope you've got some tall ladders,' said Bernice, turning her eyes up to the top of the shelves.

'Ah,' said Braxiatel. 'No need.' He reached over to the end of the nearest shelf and operated a control. Smoothly, that stack of shelves slid downwards, moving each shelf down to take the place of the previous one. The bottom shelf sank into the floor.

'Swish,' said Bernice. Braxiatel turned around, and the two of them walked back the way that he had come. 'A bit low-tech for you, though, isn't it? I'd have thought that you'd have a system to teleport stuff from the shelf into your very hands.'

'There's no need to be ostentatious,' Braxiatel replied, although Bernice knew that he didn't really believe that.

'This will be perfectly adequate. Besides, it's not that often that anybody will need to take something from the shelves. Everything here will also be stored on the Collection's network, for ease of access, but we keep master copies as well. That's what the Collection is about, after all.'

'Nice pitch,' said Bernice. 'You should use that on the promotional video.'

After a few minutes, they reached the other side of the room. There, Bernice saw a number of packing crates, each of which was a bit taller than she was, and a table, on which sat a stack of papers and some folders.

Braxiatel indicated the crates. 'Celluloid,' he said, by way of explanation.

Bernice whistled. 'Most of that must be pretty old. Not many people used that stuff after... oh... about the 2040s.'

'You'd be surprised,' said Braxiatel. 'Some filmmakers still preferred it to digital methods, even centuries later. But yes, most of it is very old indeed. I acquired all this about a year ago, from the film library at the Archives of A'r Ymylon. I've only just had a chance to look at it.' He sat at the table.

'Now, each piece of film in the Collection is assigned a category, which we have to decide on, and has an entry on the network with some relevant copy, which we have to write.'

Bernice interrupted. 'Do we have to categorise them? Can't they just go in alphabetical order? I hate pigeon-holing things.'

'Impractical in a place this size. Research would take for ever – surely you've done enough research in your time to realise that.'

'Well, yes, but if I couldn't find it, I usually just made it up.'

Braxiatel sighed. 'Bernice, as a matter of fact I really would appreciate your help with this. I don't have any specialist in this field out here yet, and you're the closest thing I've got.'

Bernice smiled. 'Really?'

Braxiatel's flattery managed to enthuse Bernice into constructing some informative copy for seven and a half of the films that Braxiatel had given her. Then she got bored and announced that she was going to watch one of them.

Braxiatel gave her a withering look. In her defence, she said that she'd write something about it when she'd finished, and ducked into one of the screening rooms.

To be fair, she had wanted to see this film for some time; it had been filmed on a planet on which she'd once made an archaeological survey. In fact, she'd looked for a copy back then, but hadn't been able to find one. Many had doubted whether it existed any more, but, of course, Irving had a copy. That was the Braxiatel Collection all over. She half-expected that somebody would come by some day in search of the Holy Grail, and discover that Irving had been using it to keep marbles in.

About an hour into the film, she chewed on the pen of her scratchpad and read back what she'd written thus far.

And The Sky Turned Blood Red (2156)

Titled after a poem by Emelia Madison, this documentary about the civil war on Delcanto in the 2140s incorporates interviews and surveys after the event, as well as contemporary footage. The film spent a long time in development, and was suppressed soon after its release amid fears over its provocative nature. The Collection's copy may be the only one surviving. Infamous for

many reasons, mainly the appearance of future political figure Jamied Norton in an interview sequence, and the powerful scene in which...

Bernice looked back up to the screen and watched the action unfold. She sipped her coffee. On the screen, the camera panned around a spaceport, catching a substantial security presence kept at a safe distance.

...a group of Divisionists, having hijacked a diplomatic mission on its way back from Delcanto to neighbouring world Callicial, execute three of the diplomats on-camera.

Bernice tutted. That sentence was far too long, and the phrase 'future political figure' didn't strike her as being grammatically correct. She looked back up at the screen and watched as two humans – one male, one female – herded three other figures from the ship. These were the diplomats, two lizard-like creatures and a humanoid with very white skin. Their arms were bound behind their backs, and their captors pushed them on to their knees.

The film crew were on board the flight, and their captors took their camera from them; hence, this controversial footage was shot by one of the hijackers. Despite protests from many quarters, the footage survived uncut to the finished film.

One of the humans shouted something that was only half-audible, then she pulled out a staser and shot the diplomats, one by one. Bernice noted that the woman left a little time between each killing, so that the others still living could watch their colleague die. The lizards simply slumped forward, but the white-skinned man reacted differently. A kind of ripple went through his body, and a flood of colours coursed through him.

It was quite beautiful.

Then his body turned black and exploded with a crackle, leaving a kind of grey dust hanging in the air.

Bernice was quite disturbed. It was only an image that she'd been watching, but all the same, it had been somebody's death. Something about it had struck her as odd, something she couldn't quite put her finger on, and she wanted to see it again. She located the projector's remote control, pointed it behind her and wound the film back. She watched the hijackers herd the diplomats down the stairway and on to the launch pad, line them up and shout to anybody who might hear them. Then they prepared to begin shooting.

Bernice squinted at the screen. The white-skinned man had his head

on the ground, and seemed to be writhing around, sobbing. She frowned. That hadn't happened the first time. Had it?

She watched the diplomats die again, one by one as before, then wound the sequence back once more. Saw the five figures emerge from the ship. Two of them lined the other three up. The two lizard creatures were shot. The camera moved closer to the white-skinned man, and the woman moved to cover him with her staser. The white-skinned man turned to the camera.

'Stop this,' he said. 'Please stop this. Please...'

And the woman shot him.

As he died, Bernice realised that he wasn't looking into the camera.

He was looking right at her.

'What do you mean, he was looking at you?' asked Braxiatel, once Bernice had dragged him through to the screening room. 'Surely he was looking into the camera?'

'No, Brax,' Bernice said, agitatedly. 'I know the difference. Anyway, that's not all. I watched it three times, and it was different each time.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure!' Bernice shouted.

'All right, all right,' said Braxiatel, holding up his hands.

'I'm just trying to establish the facts. It sounds like some kind of glitch in the system, but...'

'But that isn't possible, is it?' Bernice cut in. 'Not off the original celluloid. It's a series of little pictures on pieces of plastic. It can't just change.'

'Quite,' said Braxiatel. 'I suppose it's possible that it's an unstable point in history, one that keeps changing in barely perceptible ways, but I've never encountered anything like that myself. Hmm.'

Braxiatel was being terribly rational about all this. Bernice was starting to find it irritating. 'Check the projector,' she said.

'Benny, I –'

'Please.'

Braxiatel nodded, and walked to the back of the screening room. Whilst he carried out her request, Bernice made herself another cup of coffee.

'Well?' she said, when Braxiatel had returned.

'No,' he replied. 'It's all working perfectly well. I think I should take a look at this film myself.' He moved to the front row of seats. 'Where were you sitting?' he asked.

Bernice indicated a seat. 'There,' she said.

Braxiatel sat down. 'And you tend to slump down a little in your seat, don't you?'

'Oh, thanks,' said Bernice. 'I'm traumatised, and all you can do is

criticise my posture.'

'I'm just trying to get to your eye level,' Braxiatel replied calmly, and slid down the seat a little. It looked grossly unnatural to Bernice. At another time, she might have laughed, but at the moment it merely raised a slight smile.

Braxiatel started the film running, and Bernice turned her back on the screen.

Braxiatel did exactly what Bernice had just done; he played the film three times. Even though she wasn't looking, she could still tell that it was different each time. The first time, the white-skinned man said nothing. The second time, he screamed for help. The third time, he just sobbed. There might have been some words in there, but she couldn't make them out.

Braxiatel turned the film off, and Bernice turned around.

'What d'you think now?' she asked, a little confrontationally.

'Yes. I see,' said Braxiatel.

'Did he look at you, too?'

'Only the first two times. But you were quite right, it was distinctly different each time.' Braxiatel removed his glasses and rubbed his forehead. 'What's annoying me is that I don't recognise him.'

'Brax, you can't possibly know everybody in the Universe personally, even if you do like to give that impression.'

'No, that's not what I mean. I'm talking about his species. He seems vaguely familiar, but I can't put a name to him. Or a planet.' He turned back to the screen. The answer, I think, is in the way he dies. I don't recall ever seeing anything like it before.'

Braxiatel operated the remote control, and started the sequence halfway through. Bernice looked away again. He put the projector on hold, and Bernice turned to see at what moment he'd chosen to stop the film. The dying man was all purple at that moment, his face contorted in pain. Braxiatel turned to her.

'Now, what –' Braxiatel began, but he was cut off by a sudden rising scream from the image on the screen. Braxiatel and Bernice turned to see the dying man, still purple, convulsing wildly.

'I thought you put it on pause,' said Bernice.

'I did,' said Braxiatel. Sure enough, all other parts of the image were still. The two of them just stared, stunned, for a few seconds.

'Well don't just – turn it off!' shouted Bernice. 'For the Goddess's sake, turn it off!'

Braxiatel was flustered. Only for a split second, but he was.

Bernice hadn't seen that too many times. He pointed the remote at the projector and the image disappeared.

Bernice swallowed. 'I think we've got a ghost in the machine.'

Braxiatel was an open-minded person, but he didn't believe in ghosts. Not in the accepted sense of souls floating around the place where their bodies died, anyway. He told Bernice as much as they left the screening room.

'Oh, really?' said Bernice, testily. 'I can't help noticing that you're moving away from that projector as quickly as I am.'

'I am a little unnerved by what we just saw in there, yes.'

Bernice let out a short and scornful laugh.

Braxiatel ignored her. 'But I think that it's more important that we establish just how it came about, rather than allowing ourselves to be intimidated by it.'

'Oh,' said Bernice, 'that's just typical-of you. The arch rationalist, disparaging anybody who cares enough to react when –'

Braxiatel stopped walking. Bernice stopped too, when she realised that he wasn't alongside her any more. 'Bernice,' he said quietly, 'I would like to remind you that I come from a culture that has little in common with the one that you grew up in –'

'No,' said Bernice, 'but you've condescended to live among us, haven't you? I'm sorry, but it's you who needs to adjust.'

'Can I finish?' Braxiatel said, sharply. 'I may not express myself in the ways that you are used to, but I do care. Think about what happened back there. Whether what we saw was a ghost, or – or something else, it was in pain. And I think that, having found that to be the case, we should try and do something about it. Don't you?'

Bernice suddenly felt very small. She stared at her feet.

'No. No, you're right. I'm sorry, it just scared me a bit.'

Braxiatel, who, Bernice realised, had come closer to losing his temper than he would ever admit, visibly calmed down.

'No, I know.'

'So,' she said. 'You don't think it's a ghost?'

'No,' Braxiatel replied. 'And neither do you.'

'You've got to admit that it's something not dissimilar. It's not just a picture on a screen. Is it?'

'Oh, I think it's substantially more than just a picture on a screen. And I still think that the answer lies in what species that man belonged to.'

Bernice was surprised at just how little time it took to get a result from the database at the Anthropology department.

Braxiatel had given it just a few details about the man they'd seen, and it had quickly narrowed it down to less than twenty possible species. Then he'd scanned the entry for each one, looking for anything that might explain the phenomenon they had just witnessed. Again, he didn't seem to need her help with this, so she made herself

yet another cup of coffee.

‘Hmm,’ said Braxiatel, as she stirred in an extra sugar for her nerves. ‘This is rather interesting, a race called the Brv’cllnz. Their home planet is only a couple of systems from Delcanto, as well. Look.’

He pointed to a paragraph halfway down the monitor.

Bernice moved to his side and read over his shoulder.

The Brv’cllnz are a deeply image-driven culture, and value image as in some way sacred. In an extreme example of this, they maintain to this day a strict policy that no visual record can be made of anything on their planet. Professor Marc Schultz, author of one of the few really extensive studies of the Brv’cllnz, attempted to establish exactly where in their culture this originated; however, he made little progress, as they are generally secretive and on this point even more so. It certainly does not seem to tally with what religions exist on their world, although it resembles the superstitious beliefs of many primitive cultures that photographs steal one’s soul. The Brv’cllnz are certainly not a primitive culture, however; indeed, they are highly advanced, which makes it all the more remarkable that they have never developed any kind of imaging technology.

‘Hmm,’ said Bernice. ‘So, you think this is our alien?’

Braxiatel nodded. ‘I think it’s likely, particularly given what it says here. It’s very similar to what we saw happen in the viewing room.’

‘But a photograph can’t really capture your soul.’

‘No,’ Braxiatel replied. ‘But they seem to believe that it can.’

‘What else does it say about them?’ asked Bernice.

‘Not much. They tend not to get involved in extraterrestrial affairs. They’re an unusual race, and don’t generally understand other species.’

‘Unusual? How?’

‘Well, they’re energy creatures, which is quite rare. They don’t really have a physical form at all, although they may appear to.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really.’

‘Oh,’ said Bernice, as her mind put the information together in a variety of configurations. ‘Well, light is energy, isn’t it?’

‘Obviously, yes.’

‘And they believe that the image of a person is what’s important. And film creates an image in light.’ Bernice could see that Braxiatel had cottoned on, and by his reactions she could tell that he thought that she was right. However, she wanted the satisfaction of getting there first. ‘So, to them, that’s no different to the actual person.’

‘Good grief,’ said Braxiatel. ‘If their essence, their “soul” if you like,

really is tied to the image, then...'

'Then he's dying again and again, every time that film is played.' Braxiatel nil, Summerfield one. 'Am I right?'

'I don't know,' said Braxiatel. 'Maybe we should ask him.'

Back in the screening room, Braxiatel wound the film back one more time.

'Is everything working?' asked Bernice. 'I don't want to accidentally play back his death again...'

'It should be,' replied Braxiatel. 'I'll just cut the power if anything goes wrong.' He started the film running. They watched it up to the point when the woman shouted something – Bernice was still no closer to working out what it was – and moved to shoot the first of the diplomats.

Then, Braxiatel put the film on pause. Everything froze, except the white-skinned man. He was still kneeling on the ground, but he was swaying slightly from side to side. After a few seconds, he realised that everything around him had stopped. He looked around, and noticed Bernice and Braxiatel standing in front of him. He stood, unsteadily, his hands still bound behind him, and moved to the edge of the screen.

'Er,' said Bernice, feeling a little awkward about talking to a slide show. 'Hello? Can you hear us?' She still wasn't sure that this would work, but Braxiatel had seemed to think so, so she'd gone along with it.

'Yes,' the man nodded, wearily. 'I can hear you.'

'Right,' said Bernice. 'Good. Who are you?'

'Mrrct'llz,' he said. 'My... my name is Mrrct'llz. And you?'

'I'm Bernice Summerfield, and this is Irving Braxiatel.'

'Hello,' said Braxiatel. 'We believe that you're a member of the Brv'cllnz race, is that correct?'

'Er... yes. Yes, it is,' Mrrct'llz replied. He struggled with his bonds a little, trying to make them more comfortable. For the first time, Bernice noticed that they weren't made of the simple rope that had bound the other two creatures, but a material that glowed like neon. 'You've made an image of my death, haven't you?' Mrrct'llz asked, bitterly.

'Er, no, we haven't,' said Bernice, slightly embarrassed.

'But somebody else did, quite some time ago, and we've got it now. I'm sorry we played it. We didn't know.'

'But you do now?' said Mrrct'llz. 'You understand the implications for me?'

'Not completely,' said Braxiatel. 'The fact of your being able to exist like this doesn't conform to science as we know it. But we're aware

that your soul, or whatever you call it in your culture, is attached to this image of you.'

Mrrct'llz sighed. 'It is a little more complex than that. It is more to do with how we are perceived than anything else. You see my death, and so it happens. We don't let this be widely known amongst aliens, in case anybody were to use it against us. I don't expect you to understand, I don't really understand how your existence... functions, but essentially, you are correct. This is the only image of me that survives, this picture of my death. I will be free if you destroy it.'

'What exactly will happen to you if we do?' asked Bernice.

Mrrct'llz gave a short laugh. 'I... I don't know. Who does? But whatever it is, it will be better than this.'

'Are you sure?' asked Bernice. 'Whilst we leave the projector in this position, you'll be safe...'

'To wander around this tiny square of light? What would be the point?'

'Oh,' said Bernice. 'So, you can't...'

Mrrct'llz shook his head. 'No, this is my world now, only what you see here. Usually, the source of our image is something within us, but mine was destroyed when I died.'

Now, that –' he pointed beyond Bernice and Braxiatel at the projector – 'is what sustains my image. Please, get rid of it.'

Braxiatel nodded. 'Very well.'

'Goodbye, Mrrct'llz,' said Bernice. She felt the need to apologise to this poor creature, for all the suffering that he had endured in the name of posterity. 'And... sorry.'

Mrrct'llz nodded, and turned his back on them. Braxiatel switched the projector off and the Brv'cllnz vanished.

It had been a simple operation to cut the scene with Mrrct'llz out of the film, and splice the ends back together. Braxiatel hadn't seen the necessity in destroying the entire film. He and Bernice stood out in the courtyard of the Mansionhouse, a small fire burning before them in a stone dish, and watched the strip of celluloid bum. It felt rather like a funeral, Bernice thought.

'No wonder they're so reclusive,' said Bernice. 'The Brv'cllnz, that is. You can't go anywhere these days without having a documentary made about you.'

'Indeed,' said Braxiatel. 'I'm going to have the entire film library checked in case it's happened anywhere else. It might take a while, but...'

'Yes,' said Bernice. 'But what if this isn't the only copy of Mrrct'llz's death? What if there's another one, on a dusty shelf in some archive?'

Braxiatel turned to face her. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'If there is, I'll

find it.'

The two of them turned back to the fire, and watched the acrid smoke drift into the darkening sky.

So as you can see, there's nothing between us but professional courtesy

Wolsey has recently become a father. Again. And this after I had his bits cut off. It seems that some of the smaller local fauna, little mewy things that scuttle between the bookshelves and make dens in the crates of the less important antiquities, are genetic hybrids. They breed in a curious way.

Every now and then I've considered reproduction myself. Lending my name to a set of smaller Summerfields. Me and him, and them. But such thoughts always belonged to that golden future stuff that we all dream about but few of us get to.

You know, the bit after the book ends, where we just go on forever, happy ever after. At the back of my mind often, usually when I'm hanging by my fingertips from some precipice with someone trying to stamp on those fingertips, is a prophecy that was once made to me, by a woman who seemed to be on nodding terms with time. She said that Jason and I would have children together. Well, that means survival, right? That means the boot is always going to miss the fingers. That I'll always grab the ankle. And that one day I may have that post-closure happy ending. With him, odd as that sounds. That doesn't stop me from living my life, getting annoyed with the children I do meet, falling in love, even, because we only ever do that subject to contract with the real world and our statutory rights are not affected. I think it was Brax who said that to me.

But at my lowest points, that prophetic thought keeps me hanging on.

More of that later. My lowest points, I mean. Because there has to be. It's night now, and the bounty hunters are sleeping on their two chairs across my doorway. I chose now to introduce this story because I didn't want them to see it. Actually, there's a few of them which I might fit in now it's quiet and all you can hear is the owls hooting from across the meadow, and there's nobody listening to me dictate.

And I'm still avoiding the issue. The story features my diary, which I still keep up longhand when I get the chance, though Brax has given me a little dictation bracelet so I can keep it up to date in the field. Although sometimes I like taking my diary into the field. It's hard to put Post-it notes over the entries you want to rewrite when you're dictating. As I'm discovering right now. Besides, it's a comfort thing. And you often need comfort in a field.

I was going to publish a Collected Diaries at some point. But now I don't think I will.

My golden future has had one of its ingredients spoiled. You'll see what I mean.

4: Heart of Glass

By Daniel O'Mahony

Light lived in the walls of the glistening, shiny world. There wasn't much of a glare, but it showed up the flaws. There were bulges and delicate flute-lines in walls that should have been shaved smooth and whole. That didn't make Bernice feel any easier, but it took the edge off her discomfort.

COMBINE wasn't perfect. This was the place of their power and it was *out of whack*.

They'd given her a hard uncomfortable plastic chair. It was possibly the only piece of furniture in the office that wasn't made of glass, the only thing that wasn't giving her a headache. Before she'd set out she'd asked Braxiatel why this place was called the Exhalation and he'd put a secretive crack on his lips. She got the joke now: the whole city, its halls and hollows, had been blown into existence. It was driving her mad.

Brax, pros and cons of painful torture of. Discuss.

COMBINE'S CEO had a power complex of a desk and it was even more imposing for being glacial and unmarked.

Portraits of CEOs past were chiselled into wall reliefs behind it. And all around, the floral arrangement shimmered; every vein of every leaf hand-carved; all the dead flowers fed from a frozen spring. The tint of the room was green, murky green with the wall refraction set at around 66 percent. Wisps passed behind the walls, reminding Benny of the activity in the combs and capillaries around the CEO's office. She didn't want to look up, afraid to catch someone's footprints passing overhead.

The CEO was taking her time – *maybe trying to check your academic background, Professor?* – and the longer she was alone, the worse Benny felt. There was something about the heat and light of the glass, something spooky in the silhouettes pausing beyond the walls to gaze at her, something shivery about the sober, unyielding hardness of her surroundings. She wanted to open a window to let in some air, but there weren't any windows. In the heart of the Exhalation, Benny was breathless.

'Professor Summerfield?'

She was called The Lady. There was a family name; a secret passed down through generations since COMBINE had been founded in New Orleans back in the twentieth century.

There was a tradition of discretion and sobriety here and Bernice

had been told that the Lady was the spit of tradition.

She hadn't been warned how young she was. The Lady was twenty at most and she fixed Benny with an expression of cruel authority and amusement that left her feeling every day's difference in their ages.

Benny rose shakily to meet her gaze, take her hand. There was a migraine bleeding under her right eye so she wobbled as she stood, and her hand turned into a soft mush in the Lady's grip. The Lady made a perfect pearly smile in response. She had a dark chocolate skin, which seemed darker than the soft black felt of her suit. Benny glanced down and stared awkwardly at the Lady's feet. She had trod softly; Benny hadn't heard her come in.

A second woman had followed the Lady into the office, also barefoot but somehow louder, flamboyant in her red waistcoat, skin as pale as the Lady's was dark. She was about Benny's age, pink eyed and with a white crest of hair. The Lady's hair was pinned and tightened but her companion's barely looked combed. Both women wore COMBINE'S trademarked black rose on their lapels.

Benny's head was swimming but she would have sworn the albino winked.

'This is Ui Tereshkova, Exhalation security consultant.' The Lady had moved to sit behind her megalomaniac desk. There were no decorations there. It was just a barrier between them. The meeting was going to take about half an hour.

After that, Benny's alternative to suicide would be to take her credit to the bar and make a dent in Braxiatel's generosity.

Tereshkova took her hand and shook it and smiled, maybe reading her thoughts. She spent the rest of the meeting hovering at the Lady's shoulder and the Lady was unfazed.

Benny slid back into her chair.

'I'm disappointed Braxiatel couldn't be here in person.'

Benny's head hurt too much for her to tell whether that was conversation or a barb. 'Consider me his representative on Earth,' she said. *Not that we're on Earth. The standard of your quips is slipping, Summerfield.*

The Lady relaxed on her throne.

'Well, these aren't delicate negotiations. But I'd like to know – why you?'

Benny shrugged. 'Heavens, I don't know. Brax has work for idle hands.'

'I've been checking up on your file. You're not the first person I'd imagine Braxiatel would send to negotiate access contracts. So, what's your special interest in the Ganesh system?'

The Lady had a creamy voice but she clipped her words carefully. She was around the fourth most self-confident person Bernice had ever

met – not a good sign.

‘As an archaeologist –’

‘Yes, you’re an accredited Professor.’

Not a word wasted.

Tereshkova was the good cop here. She was smiling benevolently.

‘Braxiatel wants access to records and collections. I want to get my feet dirty. But you’ve put the lid on the system and it’s stopping us having fun. We just want to be happy.’

The Lady’s features flickered. ‘As simple as that?’ Behind her back, Tereshkova pulled a face. Everything was visible here, Benny realised, and untouchable under glass.

She nodded gently and the muscles swelled under her skull.

They kept all the drinks in crystal bottles behind the bar, in fragile jewels never so tough as glass. Liquids of all imaginable colours glistened there and after her half-hour’s frustration with the Lady, Bernice had spent the rest of the evening drinking her way through a rainbow.

The bar was the most relaxed place she’d found in the Exhalation – or identical to every other chamber but with smoke. There were ashtrails smeared on the walls, and the light was tinged carcinoma yellow. Circling the bar were glass tables, seating starched COMBINE officials with crystal tumblers posed in their hands or at their mouths. It was quiet in the bar, all conversation muting against the slight glass curve of the walls. Bernice was served by a glass automaton, whose organs and joints were visible through its blue glass skin. The pins and wires riddling its body were like veins and nerves – as fine and complex as the real thing – and it had a misshapen glass valve for a heart, pulsing gold-white in its stomach. COMBINE had built some beautiful things, Benny reflected, halfway through her third colour of the evening, but the automaton was as flawed as the rest.

They hadn’t given it eyes, or a mouth.

‘I’d talk to myself if I weren’t so ill,’ she told it as it refilled her tumbler. The glassman, no brain visible under its skull, shrugged and shuffled and went to serve an accountant. At that moment, Tereshkova came in through the opposite arch and Benny caught sight of her through the barman – the albino’s bleached hair and burgundy coat sparkling like a cocktail beneath the glass body.

‘I don’t usually come in here,’ Tereshkova said evenly, lowering herself into the stool at Benny’s side. ‘I don’t drink alcohol, it’s a poison.’ She had an unfamiliar accent, maybe Asian but definitely not Russian. Benny boggled at her through the haze of smoke, headache and half-drunkenness.

‘They serve something dreadful and white that they call milk, but you never know.’

‘It’s milk. It’s spiked. This isn’t a great place to be sober in.’

Tereshkova was grinning. She looked nervous, her shoulders rounding shyly and a dopey-girly expression on her expression. She was in love. Benny hadn’t expected that, but felt too rotten to let it show.

‘Not a company person, are you? That’s not very loyal.’

‘I’m a security consultant. I don’t have to be loyal about the interior decoration or whatever. Do you know you’re a security risk?’

‘I don’t want to be here.’

‘I’m glad you are, even if you are a non-person. Can you imagine the sort of people who like working here? If I wasn’t in security...’

Benny ignored the cue but took a sip from her crystal. It tasted first like wine, then the contents of her stomach rising, then nothing at all: COMBINE’S own brand.

‘Can I have a milk?’ Tereshkova prompted the distant barman.

‘How risky am I?’ Bernice asked. Her voice sounded thin and strange.

‘Well, you’re winding up the Lady, which is fun to watch. Maybe you just don’t like being watched?’

Benny nodded. *But it’s not that, or not just that. There’s something in the Exhalation that is scaring you.*

Tereshkova stretched out and brushed the back of Benny’s hand with her spindly white fingers. Her fingertips were disconcertingly warm. The brush lasted a moment and left a tingle. Tereshkova was grinning ineptly. She had very delicate features, finer than the walls.

‘Don’t go back to your room tonight,’ she said. Her throat bobbed under the scrawny flesh of her neck.

The automaton filled their tumblers with separate white liquids. Tereshkova took hers and the surface began to tremble.

Bernice had a room with a proper bed, short on decorations but with comfortably opaque walls. Everything was still glass, dry and confining, lending the room the morbid air of a tomb rather than a guest suite. A yellow empath globe hung over the bed, steadily filling the chamber with her desired light. That at least was pleasant. The air conditioning was on the blink; she coughed in a room full of dust.

That could be glass too. You could be shredding your lungs.

In the silence the glass breathed.

She came back from the bar alone and desperately tired, knowing that she was going to fret and fidget in bed for hours before she would get to sleep. Her diary was nestling on the covers where she’d left it hours, or maybe years, before. The empath globe, by far the friendliest thing she’d found in the Exhalation –

except Tereshkova

*true, but Tereshkova is creepy
and she fancies me
whereas that little ball just wants to fill my world with light
heavens, but I'm getting sentimental in my early middle age
This room needs some flowers to cheer it up. Maybe I could grow
something?*

The strange thing is I find myself blaming all sorts of people for feeling rotten. Esp. Braxiatel, who is going to find a brand-new circle of hell waiting for him when he dies. (And me there to greet him cheerily: 'You bastard!').

Somewhere out there is a species perfectly evolved to live in a giant mad snowstorm globe like this, and they'd be happy if only they weren't stuck in a swamp six hundred and sixty-six quintillion light years from here.

I'm very tired, diary dear.

She tucked the book under her pillow to make it more comfortable. Then she climbed into bed, struggled and slept.

Then she was sweating in the hot, dense, greenhouse room and there was a growth coming out of the wall; yes, a mansize gob of glass that welled up under the skin before peeling out into the room. Benny shrivelled in bed, terrified mute-mouthed and gazing through horrorshock eyes, as first the head pulled itself loose of the surface, a great molten embryo head with smooth glassy knots for eyes and a mouth like a grille-grin, molten and smiling; as second, a sleek torso followed; as third, it grew limbs; as fourth, it stepped clear of the wall with a blunt fist raised over her sleeping head, a livid glass sting burning at its tip.

Bernice stirred and twisted under the covers.

The glassman creaked as it came and its joints seethed.

The sting made its own mowl, the plaint of a hungry newborn. Benny, dreaming, opened her mouth and let out the air.

The automaton jumpcut before her eyes – a juddery silhouette – gone – suddenly imposing and close, leaning across her. She dreamed panic and snapped, thrashing wildly at the oncomer. Her fingers dug at the glassman's skin, skidded and slipped. Wild, her arm arced through the air, struck the empath globe and dashed it down. She heard every piece of glass tinkle across the floor.

Light sucked out of the room. The automaton still growled in the dark. The sting glowed red in the blueglass lumpfist.

It fell, invisibly.

Bernice didn't dream after that.

Then it was morning: the walls radiating false daylight.

Benny woke gasping and sweating, kicking at the tight bedclothes that had twisted round her during the night.

There was a needle of pain in the flesh below her right shoulder.

She had a bleary view over the edge of the bed, at the broken bowl of the empath globe, at the crown of fragments around it.

A bare white-skinned foot came down on a piece of glass, but if Tereshkova was hurt, she didn't say.

Benny looked up, still sleepy and not quite registering what she saw.

'I'm sorry,' Tereshkova murmured. 'I did try and warn you.'

She turned and walked out of the room, leaving Benny prone and speechless and half-awake on the bed.

'Still smiling, Professor Summerfield?'

The refraction was turned down in the CEO's office. The walls were crystalline, clear and sparkling. Every passer-by gawped, staring into the denuded office, at the Lady and her guest. Bernice sat stiff and self-conscious in the line of sight.

And she was smiling, the skin on her face stretched back furiously tight, lips narrowing over her teeth.

The Lady was poised, quiet and fragile behind the desk – smiling too, with her eyes. In front of her, surreptitious, was a slim red-covered file filled with paper. COMBINE was old-fashioned. Benny hadn't reached for it, not yet.

'Ganesh.' The Lady slid the file smooth across the desk and still Benny didn't take it. 'Cheer up. You got what you came for.'

I don't remember that in the promos. Visit the Exhalation and have your genetic makeup ransacked for fun and profit while you sleep. Company policy – leave a little piece of yourself behind!

Don't say that. Be diplomatic. People are looking.

'I heard COMBINE would steal anything that wasn't nailed down,' she said at last. 'I didn't realise how far you'd take it.'

I fear that's as diplomatic as it's going to get.

She stretched out for the file. She was certain it was going to feel bad, dirt on her hands, real stinging shifting filth.

Yes, there it is.

That's what we call a transaction,' the Lady told her. Then she lost interest, her eyes turning blankly out to stare into the unreflective gleam of the walls, and Bernice knew the meeting was over.

She found two intruders in her room but that was okay, she wasn't staying.

There was the automaton in the corner, gathering together pieces of the broken globe. Bernice shuddered vaguely as she saw her face reflected on the curve of its shoulders, but it ignored her entrance and continued feeding the glass pieces into the molten sac of its throat. It was a pottering drone, harmless.

Then there was Tereshkova.

Later that day, on the shuttle home, Bernice reimagined the meeting and came up with a hundred and one witty quips to throw at the security consultant. One would end up recorded in her diary and that one she'd remember. She'd forget being tired and bitter and out of one-liners, forget tossing the Ganesh file at the albino's head. Tereshkova batted it and its contents broke across the floor. The glassman shook wearily and moved to gather the spilled sheets.

'Please,' she said, in the diary. *'Don't tell me to cheer up.'*

Tereshkova's bare arms were skinny and pink. She was on the bed, the ruffled sheets pulled up round her knees. She looked drawn and calculatedly desirable. Defenceless too –

Benny had to fight to keep herself angry.

'I'm not going to bed with you,' Bernice snapped, probably embarrassing the meticulous drone, though its skin remained an unflustered green. Tereshkova just squatted, holding her heavy head in her hands and watching dispassionately through glazed tawny-brown eyes. Benny fumed in front her, making a performance of her discomfort.

A faint smile formed on the younger woman's face and she ran a languid hand through her hair, revealing rich brown seams within the white. Benny's diary was on the bed by her knees, closed and tantalisingly unread. It irritated Bernice to see it *displayed*. She wanted to snatch it away; she should; she didn't know why she couldn't.

Something was strange.

She wasn't looking at Tereshkova, then she was.

All Benny's bitterness went out of her. *'What's wrong with your hair?'* she asked. Tereshkova made a faint laugh, and her eyes flicked down, shamefully. Benny moved closer to study the woman's face, her skin and her colour. The albino bleaching was fading, like a layer of skin cracking or a disguise slightly slipped. She smelt faintly of dead roses.

Bernice lifted her unresisting arm, revealing an oblong sore beneath her armpit.

'It's a genetic mask. Anything COMBINE takes from me will be... not me,' Tereshkova said softly, smug and shameful simultaneously. *'Not usable.'*

'It's not working.'

'I was late taking the booster.-' Her face shrugged. *'I wanted you to see.'*

'Why are they collecting all this?' Benny asked, insistently, face and body pushing it closer. *'You must know what they're planning?'*

Tereshkova rolled her head. *'COMBINE won't do anything with your DNA or my DNA or anyone's DNA. It's acquisition. Policy.'* Then softly she added: *'I'm worried about who they might sell it on to.'*

At that point, dear reader; I put my arm out and held her. We were wonderfully miserable together. Always fun. Note to Braxiatel: group hugs, recommended – and stop reading my diary or I'll rip your lungs out.

All Tereshkova wanted was to let me know I wasn't alone – that there was someone at the Exhalation who wasn't as shiny and slippery as the walls. Someone to talk to.

She was shivering, poor thing. Her skin was cold as glass.

I asked her if she'd read my diary and she said:

'I haven't. Someone has.' By then she was standing, leant against the wall. Bernice could imagine her skin turning ice white again as the booster took effect, slowly going transparent and revealing the glass at her back. Benny was sitting on the edge of the bed, with the diary clasped in both hands and itching as she imagined other hands picking through it.

They don't serve alcohol on the shuttle do they?

'You lot have stolen everything I brought here.'

Tereshkova grinned toothily and nodded. Benny could have screamed.

Instead she sprang to her feet and hurled the diary at the far blank wall. There was a hard crunch when it made contact, then it fell, unnoticed, pages splayed open, on the floor. Tereshkova was staring at the long shallow crack that had opened on the wall and if she said anything it was drowned by Benny's coarse, cathartic laughter.

There are some people in this cosmos who are willing to hurt you in the most particular ways. It seems to be my job, uniquely to trip over them. Fortunately not all of my adventures... Oh, Goddess, I still can't get used to calling things I've done 'adventures'. Whatever I said in the introduction. You're going to have to get used to me contradicting myself. The people I'm with have adventures, certainly, but I'm the one standing beside them with the monkey wrench trying to get them not to. I'm an anti-adventuress. I see adventure beckoning ahead and stick two fingers up at it.

Because of, you know, baths. And food that someone else has cooked and employed waiters to serve. And biccies. I don't actually like dirt. I'd quite happily direct a bunch of research students to do my digging from within a comfortable air-conditioned pod with a supply of teacakes and warm beer.

Of course, then I wouldn't get to hold the good stuff in my hands. The tiny piece of tile that changes everything. The coin that's worth a fortune to my own community and nothing to anyone who's interested in money The moment when you see something in the mud and realise it either really should or really shouldn't be there. I'd miss all that.

Oh, for goodness' sake, a verbal Post-it: I love having adventures.

I think it's that urge to reach out and touch that forces me to. That and

the fact that I'm quite content to trip over those hurtful people I mentioned myself, but I sort of feel they're my job and that they shouldn't have power over others.

Sometimes, my own speciality throws up, and I mean throws up, someone like that. In my own backyard, so to speak. And sometimes I find all my contradicting impulses thrown together to do something about them.

And sometimes, they trip over their own feet...

5: The Monster and the Archaeologists

By Kathryn Sullivan

Professor Uzua stepped back and let the weak morning light fall upon the revealed section of mural for the first time in twenty centuries. The colours were amazingly well-preserved: the brilliant blue of the princess's robes; the white claws of the monster; the red rays of the sun streaming down to outline the hero with their protection. She envisioned the artist stepping back just so to admire its completion and felt a kinship with the long-ago crafter.

Her ears flicked as she heard the twins outside speaking to a tourist, probably one stopping by on the way to the Bricksett dig at the massive tomb structure. All well and good that the Wyzyna allowed offworlders to investigate their past, but they did pick the most inconvenient moments for sightseeing.

She brushed a stubborn wisp of dust from the malachite chips of the hero's brow. Although she would have enjoyed excavating the mazetomb that Bricksett now worked, this site was turning out much better than she had hoped.

Professor Bernice Summerfield followed the sound of voices to the edge of the closest excavation. She cleared her throat in an attempt to get rid of the dust as well as gain attention, and the two overalled workers inside the dig looked up.

Gandagum twins, she thought, at the sight of the identical large, scoop-shaped ears, and long snouts banded with dirty orange armourlike plates. The one on the lower level hesitated with a shovelful of dirt, sunlight glinting off green goggles. Benny swallowed a smile as she noticed that the blue-clad Gandagum just below her not only had yellow goggles but was wearing blue polka-dotted ear covers as well. Fashion tips for the young archaeologist. 'I'm looking for Professor Uzua?'

'You want to talk to Mother,' said the polka-dotted Gandagum. 'She's over at the shrine.'

'Unless she wants to talk to Father,' said the green-clad twin. 'He's out surveying. Were you looking for Professor Uzua or Professor Uzua?'

If there was a difference in pronunciation, Benny didn't catch it. She unslung her rucksack from her shoulder and rummaged inside. 'I'm

looking for the Professor Uzua who found this.’ She pulled out the souvenir holoprojector and activated it. An image of the painted vase shimmered into being above the small unit.

‘You want to talk to Mother.’

‘She’s at the shrine.’

The two looked expectantly at each other. Polka-dotted ears flattening, the blue-clad Gandagum sighed. ‘Faris, it’s your turn with the tourists!’

Benny tried to defuse the situation. ‘Oh, I’m not a –’

‘Sorry, forgot!’ The green-clad twin barreled up the ramp on all fours. She rose to her back feet once out of the dig and addressed Bernice. ‘Welcome. What we call the shrine is over this way.’ She brushed at the dirt on her overalls and fur and lifted her goggles from her eyes as she waited for Benny to join her. ‘I’m Uzua Faris. And below you is my sister Faham, excavating what we believe to be an inn –’

‘Town hall,’ came the muttered correction from below.

‘– that was built on the same spot as an inn, which is at the layer I was working on. Roughly two centuries separate the levels.’

The top of her head (ignoring the ears) was barely on a level with Benny’s shoulder, and Benny mentally revised the twins’ age downward to human midteens. Up close the Gandagum resemblance to an oversized armadillo was even more pronounced. Faris’s fur and bands of armour were orange marmalade in colour under the dirt, but the patch of fur between her ears and running down the sides of her neck seemed to have been dyed a bright green.

Faris touched the clawtips of both hands together and nodded slightly as Benny joined her. She started towards the cliffs, skirting tools and heaps of dirt. ‘We don’t have the size crew of the Bricksett site, so we’re doing sondages – uh, that’s –’

‘– selected sampling cuts,’ Benny supplied. The large ears flicked upwards. ‘Professor Bernice Summerfield,’ she continued, answering the obvious question.

‘Professor? You’re one of us, then? Not a tourist? I wasn’t sure because of that.’ She gestured at the deactivated projector in Benny’s hand. ‘It looks like something from a souvenir shop.’

‘It is,’ Benny agreed. ‘The museum sponsoring the exhibit had one for each artefact, and this was easier to pack.’

‘Oh.’ Faris resumed her recitation. ‘Scanning from space and then flypasts gave us the locations of some buildings –’

‘And geophysical prospecting?’

‘The magnetic fields helped locate the shrine area – that was totally buried by driftsand, due to being so close to the cliffs.’ She pointed at the rocky hillside a short distance beyond several brightly-striped

tents, the horizontal layers of purple and yellow limestone warring with the vertical stripes of tangerine and turquoise cloth. 'Father estimates this town went through three or four stages of growth and decline. He still does a walking survey every other day, along with analysing the surface finds.'

The next large excavation contained an almost intact small building against the cliff. 'Mother,' Faris called as they started down the ramp, 'we have a visitor.'

'Visitor?' A tall calico-coloured Gandagum emerged from the structure. She finished tucking brushes and picks into pockets of her apron-like surcoat and peered short-sightedly down at Benny as they reached the bottom of the ramp.

'Welcome.' She put her glasses on and her ears lifted.

'Welcome indeed, Professor Summerfield.' She came down the ramp to meet them.

'You know her?' asked Faris. Benny was surprised as well; she didn't recall meeting this particular archaeologist.

'Author of *Down Among the Dead Men*? It was on your reading list last year, dear.' Faris mumbled something as her mother put her clawtips together and nodded to Benny.

'Professor Uzua Jindah, and may I say how honoured I am? Your book inspired me as a child.'

'I'm working on a sequel,' Benny said hurriedly, hoping to avoid questions about the copyright date. 'Just call me Benny.'

'Ah. Then please call me Jindah.' She began shepherding Benny and Faris up the ramp. 'You must be parched. Would you care for some tea?'

'What a piece of junk!' Faham turned the holoprojector over and over, her curved claws slicing through the projected image of the vase as it spun above the unit. 'That museum should be ashamed of itself!'

'Faham,' her mother warned, taking the projector. The younger Gandagum's ears lowered, earrings jangling within the blue polka-dotted ear covers. But a growl began in the professor's throat as she studied the image. 'The colours are so washed out they're transparent and you can barely see Legyozhet, let alone what he's fighting!'

Benny put down her cup of laceywing tea. 'What is he fighting?'

'A monster from the underworld,' Faham said.

'Does it have a name? Have you found anything else like that?'

Faris finished working on a datapad. She pointed it, and the image from the vase loomed on the tent wall. But this had even more detail than Benny had been able to see on the actual vase – one of several artefacts in a travelling exhibit, an ordinary example of painted pottery from a long-vanished culture. Benny hadn't thought much of it

at first.

The artist's style seemed to be a mixture of exact, realistic detail for the hero of the piece, and a very simplistic, almost stick figure depiction of his enemy. The 'sticks' resemblance to bones in this image was even more pronounced.

Intent on the new details, she let Faris's narration wash over her. 'Legyozhet's a popular hero from the Zulawy myths. He fights a lot of different monsters.' The display split to show a list of names and numbers. 'He's Mother's favourite study,' she added with a slight ear curl.

'I don't think Professor Summerfield is interested in Legyozhet.' Jindah returned the projector to Benny. Her dark eyes studied the human. 'There are better portraits of him. It's that monster, isn't it? I'm sorry, but we haven't found any inscriptions with its name, just a word that translates as "monster" and is used for several other creatures as well. But your arrival is timely. Show the enhanced image, Faris.'

The next image was almost the same, but with one slight difference. 'Some colours faded faster than the rest, but there were enough traces to show this under scan.'

Benny stared at the now visible striped cliff face surrounding the monster. 'That's -'

'- the cliff outside, yes,' Jindah agreed.

The comlink atop the nearby crates pinged. 'Jindah, you there?' a voice asked.

'Tihad? You're missing tea, dear.'

Benny peered closer at the image. The being didn't seem to be simply standing in front of the cliff; somehow the artist had managed to suggest that it was emerging from the actual rock. 'But, this is fantastic!'

'I know,' came the voice from the comlink. 'I need Fa here to help.'

Benny blinked, wondering why that would follow. 'No, just holding that datapad steady is enough help.' She tried to decide which striped band was the actual point of emergence.

'Which one?' Jindah asked, ignoring Benny.

'Either. Both, if they want. I've found an opening in the cliff, but it's too narrow for me.'

'An opening in the cliff could be what the artist tried to depict,' Benny mused. 'Good idea; I should go look at that.'

'Faham, you go help your father. Take him some tea and some of those crunchy biscuits.'

'No more for me, thanks,' the crackly voice responded.

'Unless there're any of those chocolate-covered ants left.'

'What's so important about some made-up monster?' Faris sighed,

passing the biscuit plate.

'This isn't a made-up monster. This –' Benny waved along the stretches of white 'is the skeleton of a Mtongl.'

Jindah dropped the lid of a crate. 'Here? But their areas of conquest were back in the Hodge Cluster.'

Faris looked from one to the other. 'Invasion? From off-planet? There've been no reports of that in Zulawy history.'

Benny frowned. 'I don't think the Zulawy were invaded.'

The time periods don't seem to overlap. I checked with a historian before coming here, and the Mtongl could have reached this planet in their heyday, although there's no record of them doing so.' She grinned. 'Until now.'

'I don't understand,' Faris complained. 'How –?'

'A ship could have landed here on Wyzyn and left their dead behind. The Zulawy found the fossilised remains and voila –' she gestured at the image – 'a monster. That's my theory. I can't prove anything unless the Zulawy were kind enough to leave some remains undisturbed.' Benny finished off her tea and looked around. 'Did someone say something about an opening in the cliff?'

Faris shut off the datapad with a relieved sigh, and Jindah shooed her daughter outside. 'Yes, but give Tihad a chance to look. He gets cranky when he's digging.' Faris snorted, but Jindah ignored her and held the tent flap open for Benny. 'And there's something I want you to see first.'

'And someone thought she could buy this mural?' Benny asked.

There were three panels on the protected interior wall, but only one fully uncovered. Legyozhet stood in the centre panel, the pebbling of his green hide represented by malachite and mica chips. Red striped his brown tunic and flowed around him as he waved his two clubs at the righthand panel, of which only white claws could be seen at the top of a concealing layer of driftsand. All that could be seen of the lefthand panel was a swirl of azurite that intruded into the centre panel.

'Earlier this morning,' Jindah delicately cleaned her claws.

'Faham waited to tell me until after the... female left.'

'Tourists.' Benny shook her head.

Jindah sighed. 'They're the one condition of our commissions the Wyzyna insisted on, but they are a bother. Now, the centre panel was easy to clean off. It appeared to have been kept clear for years. There was a small collection of pottery and jewelry at its base.'

'Definitely a shrine or ex-voto at one point.'

'The other panels will take a bit of work to uncover.'

Benny plucked a brush from the bag Faris was carrying for her

mother. ‘Dibs on the monster.’

A short time later, Benny felt something plucking at her clothing. ‘Professor Summerfield?’

She lowered the brush and stretched, backing away from the panel, and Faris moved on to Jindah. ‘Mother, Father says you must see this.’

Benny studied the panel as she worked the kinks out of her back. The top half of the monster now threatened Legyozhet. But she could tell the artist could not have seen the original Mtongl remains; the carved shell ‘sticks’ had lost any resemblance to bone and any sense of articulation. They were now just decorations on a more fanciful creature. She made a mental note to check how many years separated the vase and the mural. Perhaps a scan would reveal another painting beneath.

She wandered over to examine the first panel, while she waited for Jindah to cease working. The princess had a determined look on her green-pebbled features and was wielding an impressive pickaxe despite the flowing robes.

Jindah had also uncovered several, lines of glyphs beneath the figure, which explained the muttering Benny had been hearing from that side for a while.

‘What must I see?’ Jindah’s ears flattened in irritation.

‘Can’t it wait? I just want to work on this inscription a bit longer. Now, “the princess went on alone” could mean...’

‘Mother!’ Faris took a deep breath and turned to Benny.

‘It’s a ship.’

‘What type of ship?’ Jindah peered over the top of her glasses at a glyph. ‘Ceremonial? Lake? Ocean? Ah, that could be how the princess traveled. Though I don’t think there’ve been any bodies of water near here for –’

‘Spaceship. Mother, we’ve found a spaceship inside the cliff.’

‘How should I know how it got in there?’ a large and extremely dusty Gandagum was saying to Faham when Benny and Faris arrived at the base of the cliff. ‘Maybe it crashed into the mountain. Maybe the owners put it into a cave. Maybe it landed so long ago that the mountain grew up around it. We won’t know until we examine the surrounding rock and age date it.’

‘And even then there’ll be arguments about it.’ Benny stepped forward, put her fingertips together and nodded.

‘Professor Bernice Summerfield. But you can call me Benny.’

He repeated the gesture, black and orange ears flipping.

‘Tihad. Fa tells me you came looking for signs of alien contact.’ He pointed to an opening some way up the side of the cliff. ‘I think we found it for you.’

Benny braced her feet in the clawholds and looked out at the desert as Faris scrambled up and into the opening. She could see the bright colours of the tents around the curve of the cliff. On the horizon was the flash of reflected light from a ship landing at the spaceport.

‘That last clawhold is shallow,’ Faris warned. ‘Grab my tail; I’ll pull you the rest of the way up.’

‘No, no, don’t need a rope,’ Faham muttered sarcastically as she waited below.

The opening had been enlarged to accommodate an adult Gandagum’s shoulder-width and height in the all-fours posture. Benny alternately crouched and crawled forward, following Faris through the narrow passage. The faint light from the opening behind her vanished as Tihad joined them.

Then light appeared before her as Faris emerged into the cave.

Benny looked around as she paused in the opening. The ‘cave’ was a small pocket of space around a metal wall.

Lights placed at Gandagum height in the neighbouring rock allowed her to see that the metal wall continued some distance in either direction, even past where the rock closed in to press against the hull.

A hull. Benny repeated it to herself as she moved closer.

Not a metal wall, but the actual hull of a ship. From its curvature, this wasn’t one of the Mtongl giant slaver ships nor a two person scout, but a medium class ship, a rare find in itself. Depending on how much of the ship was intact, it could stretch back almost to the village.

Tihad padded over to the farther section and rapped on it with the back of his hand. This seems to be the outer door. Too bad blasting it open might damage the village. And Jindah would not be pleased.

Jindah was not pleased at all. She tried to speak calmly into the comlink. One should not irritate Administrator Biima, no matter how much one wished to throttle him. ‘Tihad may not be an expert on these particular aliens, as your enquirer claims to be, but I’m sure I don’t need to remind you who discovered the space tomb of the Rhinsel. And that was before he met me.’ She smiled fondly at the memory of the younger Tihad before continuing, ‘We have the rights to this area this season, and we have the help of Professor Bernice Summerfield, who has prior claim on the discovery of the Mtongl landing on this world.’ How had anyone learned about the mural so quickly? ‘Unless you are suggesting that rights once granted can be tossed aside midway through the season, which would seriously compromise the whole structure of seasonal commissions...’

At the other end of the comlink, the administrator gasped.

‘I assure you, Professor Uzua, that was not my intention. I will

inform the Honoured Sir, then, that he has no claim.'

He sounded downcast, but Jindah didn't weaken. Once anyone learned of the ship... 'No claim at all,' she said firmly.

'He is welcome to visit as is any other tourist, but we manage this dig.'

Breaking the connection, she stalked back to her mural and the set of glyphs under the monster/Mtongl figure. The next interruption had better not be for anything less serious than an earthquake. "'Legyozhet defeated the monster at the gates", no... "who guarded the..." hmm... pickaxes again...'

Benny studied the hull around the circular door. 'Most spacefaring people place emergency controls – ah!' She pulled out the brush she had tucked into a pocket and dug at what had appeared at first glance to be a circular pattern of four indentations. She tested the resulting openings against her fingertips, remembered the vase, and glanced at Tihad's hand. 'Can you fit your claws into these?'

Tihad tried, but only one clawtip fitted. 'Too broad and blunt for this. Fa!' he bellowed.

'Which one?' two voices responded. Faris continued to drag a sack of lights across the cave while Faham emerged from the passage with more supplies.

'Whichever of you has the longer nails – err, claws,' Benny said. She gestured at the lock. 'Want to try opening the door?'

The twins compared hands, and Faham hurried to settle herself where Benny indicated. She attempted to match her claws with the pattern. 'It works!'

The circular door split in half, and the halves slowly edged apart. Soon there was room even for Tihad to squeeze through.

Faris handed Benny a filter mask. 'Father's rule with sealed areas,' she apologised.

'Took me a year to recover from the moulds in the Rhinsel's space tomb,' Tihad explained.

'Yes, that's it!'

Jindah guiltily dropped the filter mask at the sudden noise.

She peered around the panel and was nearly blinded as light blazed across the mural.

'Here you can see the primitive depiction of the invading Mtongl as they savagely enslaved the early inhabitants of this planet, much as they did in the Hodge Cluster.'

Blinking rapidly, Jindah saw a short humanoid with bushy head fur trotting toward her. The media crew focused the cameras, and lights, on him as he stopped and gestured at the centre panel. 'And here you see some poor unfortunate blasted by their death rays.'

Jindah felt her ears flatten at the being's arrogance. He presumed to lecture about her find?

'No, that is not what you see. Who are you and what' – she gestured at the cameras, wishing the spots before her eyes would vanish as well – 'is the meaning of this?'

'Professor ais-ldo Niwlog. I realise that this might be hard to comprehend, but –' he paused dramatically, his ear tufts quivering – 'I have evidence that this culture was visited by the Mtongl.'

He was speaking more to the cameras than her, but Jindah was in no mood for his theatrics.

'Yes, yes, Professor Summerfield showed us that earlier today.'

He gaped at her, then waved frantically at the cameras.

The crew took it as a signal to move in closer. He tried turning his back to them to whisper, 'She's here?'

Jindah wondered if this was the historian Benny had mentioned consulting; this was obviously Biima's 'Honoured Sir' and, equally obviously, Biima had not spoken to him. Or maybe he had.

She spoke over him to the media. Now that she could see again, some of them looked familiar. 'Professor Summerfield will talk to you shortly regarding the discoveries she has made about the Mtongl. In fact,' she continued, 'if you follow me, we will see if she is ready now.' After all, Jindah reasoned, if her visitor was that concerned about Benny, then Benny would know best how to rid them of him.

'Professor Niwlog?' Benny's voice over the comlink sounded surprised. 'I thought you said that it was impossible for the Mtongl to have reached here?'

'Ah, but I reconsidered. Your arguments were most convincing.'

'You mean you went and checked the vase at the exhibit.'

Benny muttered something Jindah didn't catch. 'I suppose it's all right if they see the ship; there's nothing to –'

One of the Wyzyna journalists spilled her tea. 'There's a ship?'

'Which way?'

Jindah wordlessly pointed and stood back as the stampede headed out through the tent entrance. She watched Niwlog struggling to catch up with the longer-legged Wyzyna.

'Watch Niwlog, Tihad,' she said into the comlink. 'He tried to claim jump.'

There was a growl in response, and Benny's voice added,

'Which explains the media circus.'

'Oh, and I may have found a passage.'

'Excellent, Jindah. Shall I send Fa to help?'

'No, you'll need them both there. It most likely leads to a mine; the entrance was marked with a pickaxe glyph.'

'This site does predate their maze-building fad,' he agreed.

'Be careful, though.'

'Always. You be careful around Niwlog.'

Benny waited as Niwlog and his entourage gathered inside the cave. The rotund figure with its bush of brown and grey hair was one of the first out of the passage. His voice preceded him. 'Of course they'll need my help to enter the ship. My knowledge of the Mtongl technology helped in the design of the...'

Niwlog stopped at the sight of the open ship doors. 'But... you've opened them.' He looked from the thick rod in his hand back to the ship. 'I've never been able to... not without blasting –'

Benny wasn't surprised; Niwlog's stubby fingers lacked claws or nails. Four more Wyzyna emerged from the passage, then Faris and Faham, whose uncovered earrings sparkled in the lights.

Tihad raised his voice above the questions. 'As far as we are able to determine, this ship crashed on Wyzyn long before the Zulawy civilisation.'

Niwlog opened his mouth, but Tihad had gestured towards Benny, and the cameras that had been focused on the ship pivoted in her direction. 'At least one of the crew did not survive the crash. The survivors buried him near here, where his remains were found by the Zulawy and incorporated in their art, as depicted on the vase discovered two years ago by Professor Uzua Jindah.' On cue, Faris activated the enhanced image from her datapad. There were 'ahs' as a few recognised the cliffs.

A Wyzyna waved. 'Professor Niwlog said that the Mtongl invaded the Zulawy.'

'The vase –' Niwlog started.

'– is the first record of any contact,' Benny smoothly fielded. 'But if the Zulawy had encountered a live Mtongl, why is only a skeleton on the vase? Anyone who'd actually seen a Mtongl in full battle armour would find it much scarier than a collection of bones.' There were some appreciative chuckles.

Jindah hesitated. There were bones under the rubble. Burial, accident, or trap? She glanced at the ceiling of the passage.

The rockfall could have been natural, assuming this was a mine. Perhaps the shrine was to honour those who had died while the mine was active.

She went back to creating an opening through the rubble, leaving the side with the bones untouched.

'As you can see,' Tihad commented as the Wyzyna followed him down the dimly lit corridors, 'the Mtongl stripped the ship of supplies for

their survival.’ Benny, following behind the group, with the twins as her flanking shepherds, admired his calm tour-guide tones after his excitement the first time through the ship. ‘Weapons, of course, tools, some furniture –’

Benny studied the crowd. Niwlog fluctuated from excited to frustrated to disappointed. Most of the Wyzyna were attentive, some only politely so, but one, a female, seemed bored.

‘She looks familiar somehow,’ Faham muttered, indicating the bored woman to her sister.

‘That’s the one I practically had to shove up the rope,’ Faris whispered. ‘She wanted to go back to the dig.’

They stopped in one room where nothing remained but the brackets lining the walls and the support beams. The next room appeared untouched. The only camera which did not record both rooms was that held by the Wyzyna Faham was watching.

‘Look at his ears,’ noted Faris, who was concentrating on their father. ‘Between him and Mother, we’ll be spending the next two seasons here.’

Faham suddenly let out a surprised whistle, her eyes still fixed on the female. ‘That’s it!’ she whispered. ‘She’s the one who wanted the Legyozhet mural. That’s weird. What’s she come back for?’

‘Another sniff,’ sighed Faris. ‘Best not interrupt Father.’

Faham scowled, but Benny agreed. The Wyzyna could be a journalist who had been masquerading as a tourist to look at the mural earlier – or an obsessed collector masquerading as a tourist and now a journalist. ‘Keep an eye on her,’ Benny told the earringed twin, ‘and let me know if she does anything suspicious.’

‘And that concludes what we have explored so far. Once we have opened the remaining sealed areas –’

‘Where valuable technology could still remain! Doubtlessly weaponry not needed, the plunder from their raids Niwlog’s ear tufts melded into his hair as his voice rose. The mural shows that the death ray, or personal force shields, survived!’

An indignant ‘What?!’ exploded on one side of Benny and muffled snorts of laughter on the other.

The Wyzyna murmured excitedly, checking and comparing recordings of the mural. ‘That red glow?’

‘The clubs?’

‘I demand to see those areas!’

Tihad glanced back at Benny with a quizzical curl of his ears and Benny shrugged. They might have to go through the ship several times before Niwlog accepted that there was no treasure here.

Jindah looked around in awe at the chamber revealed by her

handlight. She stepped carefully among painted pottery vases, urns of blue marble and statues of Zulawy workers and nobles. A small wooden table was draped with jewellery of silver, amethyst, lapis lazuli and carnelian. Paintings covered the plastered walls. One wall contained scenes of Legyozhet battling monsters – not only the monster from the shrine, but giant forms of the carnivores from the time period and others. An alcove held scenes from The Book of Stepping Forth of a much simpler design than those that appeared in mazetombs.

Jindah turned slowly. This site predated any of the mazetombs. Was this the start? The wall to her right had a painting depicting the princess's visit to a village by a striped cliff. A similarly striped drapery hung from the ceiling, hiding what rested on a platform in the centre of the room.

'It won't turn.' Faham pulled her claws back out of the lock.

'I'll get the endoscope,' Faris volunteered.

'So you have failed?!' Niwlog stepped up to the door.

'Then I shall be the one to reveal the secrets of the Mtongl! I claim this discovery!'

Benny suddenly realised the rod in his hand wasn't a torch.

'No, wait!'

Something shot from the rod and shattered against the door.

The concussion knocked most of them back and raised a cloud of dust. Benny struggled to her feet, aiming her handlight to check on the rest. She spared a glance for Niwlog. Tihad had pinned the smaller being against the wall.

Faris was trying to pull him off.

She turned her attention to the door.

'Jindah's underground! If she's harmed...' yelled Tihad.

'The charge was set for the standard thickness!' the archaeologist was shouting. 'I checked the design of these ships! I don't know why it was thinner than usual!'

The jagged opening was large enough for Benny to step through. The dust cloud was thicker inside. She fingered the edge of the opening. Why was there plaster over the door?

'But the discovery is mine!' Niwlog's voice was still bellowing from the outer chamber. 'I claim it, quite legally! I shall be known as the one who...' Niwlog's voice faltered and Benny knew that he was looking past Tihad at the same thing she was.

A large white shape loomed out of the dust cloud.

It was heading straight for her.

She leapt out of the opening, tripped over Faris, and hit Tihad and Niwlog at full pelt, sending them staggering apart.

Behind her came the shape.

It sprang out of the opening, leapt over her, and pinned Niwlog against the wall once more, shedding a thick layer of plaster dust as it hit.

‘Jindah!’ Tihad gasped in relief.

But every bit of Jindah’s attention was on the terrified Niwlog. ‘You blew up Legyozhet!’ she snarled through the filter mask.

Benny let out a long breath, retrieved her handlight, and stepped back through the door. She shone the light about, marveling at the ingenuity of the Zulawy.

And then she started to laugh. ‘Love what they’ve done with the place.’

Every other section of the ship had bristled with metal fixtures, cabinets, support beams.

But here they had all been removed. Even the walls had been scraped of brackets and plastered over.

Not a single artefact of the alien culture remained.

She could only wonder at what uses they had made of the metal. What techniques had they developed to work it?

Wincing at the sight of a painting with a very large hole in it, she swung her light about, looking for, and finding, the entrance Jindah had used.

‘Wonder if that’s from before... or during the landing.’ A quick scan under the plaster there could answer that. ‘The Mtongl sealed off the ship, but the Zulawy found the hull breach.’

‘A mining village,’ Tihad agreed, wandering in beside her.

‘This was the mine, their source of metal.’

‘And when they couldn’t mine it any further,’ Benny finished, ‘they turned it into a tomb.’ She approached the platform in the centre of the room. Despite a fresh layer of plaster dust, the shrouded form seemed undamaged.

‘Jindah? Is it... Legyozhet?’

Bright lights blazed behind her as the media followed the swiftly calming, but slightly bewildered, Gandagum archaeologist into the room. Jindah pointed to another painting, one with striped cliffs in the background. ‘No, the shrine said she “went on alone.” This can only be the princess.’

From behind them, there came a cry of despair. Into the chamber stumbled Niwlog. ‘But... But I thought... No! My discovery! My precious discovery!’

Benny spun round at a shout from Faham. The young being was frantically gesturing in the direction of one of the Wyzna. A female, who was reaching into her jacket to produce... a comlink.

‘Biima,’ she said briskly into it, meeting Benny’s relieved gaze with

a little smile. 'Shati. My museum will top any offers to display the Uzua collection. No, forget the Bricksett site.'

Niwlog started to sob.

'Oh, there might be things the Zulawy didn't use,' Tihad said cheerfully, patting his competitor on the shoulder. 'I can direct you to the midden heap. Of course, you'll have to sift through several centuries of rubbish as well.'

The twins looked at each other. 'Midden.'

Benny put her head between theirs and whispered conspiratorially. 'Lucky things. You'll be here for ever. With the monster.'

They turned and watched as Niwlog pushed Tihad aside and stamped out of the chamber, pushing a camera crew out of the way.

'Or,' said Benny, 'perhaps you won't.'

Hee hee hee. That still makes me laugh. Hee hee... Sorry. Hoist by his own petard. A petard being a sort of ancient bomb, you see, rather than the kind of theatrical rope or banner the word rather suggests. If you're 'hoist' by one of those then you're blown up into the... oh no, I'm being boring now, aren't I?

Displacement action. Like taking the rubbish out when you're supposed to be working on the next chapter of your...

Like including a funny story when you were supposed to be using this night to include all the really scary stuff.

Anyhow. The thing is, I'm trying to avoid talking about love.

And I ought to do it now, because the bounty hunters are still snoring and I'm determined to avoid them seeing anything intimate. A trifle late, considering I had to grab Mr Plurk by the back of the neck and lever him out of my underwear drawer. But I doubt he would have found much in there to entertain him.

Although love has recently become a bit more complicated for me, as you'll see later on in this collection, I can still count my conquests on both hands. I was of the opinion, quite early on in my romantic life, that I had met the man with whom I was to spend the rest of my life, you see.

And now... well, I really don't know.

More displacement action, a midnight wander around my rooms. I found some ice cream that I'd hidden in the fridge. And Wolsey has returned, and is sitting on my lap, so I now have sources of comfort close at hand. It may have taken a vast interplanetary war in the Carnexti system to develop the cryogenic technology required to make genuine vodka ice cream, but the loss of millions of lives was a small price to pay.

Joke, joke. I hope you're the sort of audience I don't have to say that to all the time. The first batch of review copies will probably land on the desk of the Carnexti Veterans Association.

Whatever. Sometimes love creeps up on me, and I suddenly sort of just

realise that it's there when I start shaving my legs every day and singing on my bicycle. The story that follows is written in the first person. Editors seeking to employ the author will be disappointed, I'm afraid, in that they'll be unable to find him. Shortly after completing this piece, he told me that he was going to vanish from the galaxy, hide out in some desolate corner; never to reappear. He told me not to forward any enquiries, and besides, he didn't tell me where he'd gone. So you won't be able to find any trace of this talented first-timer; despite the fact that he's very real indeed.

The story that follows is about Bernice in love. A condition our mysterious author seems to understand intimately. Isn't that unusual, my dears? And it was easy to find this one, it was in a drawer, waiting. But here I am, possibly or probably not in love at the moment. But I don't want to spoil the ending of this one. You go ahead and read it, as long as I don't have to again. They're not paying, or rather threatening, me enough for that.

6: Step Back in Time

By Matt Jones

Bernice Summerfield's diary. Post-it note covering the entry for Thursday May 29th:

Normal day at the Collection. Studied hard. Made some real progress on the theoretical chapter of my new work. It's really coming together. I may even beat my publisher's deadline. Hung out with Anderson – aren't gay men funny? We met an interesting independent scholar, and whilst Anderson was completely bowled over by the scholar's superficial good looks, I barely noticed, and I mean not even slightly – no romantic interest whatsoever. The independent scholar did ask me to dinner; and in the name of scholarly solidarity and academic fraternity; I accepted. I hope that, in time, we may become friends. In the true platonic sense of the word, you understand.

Post-it note covering the above:

Bleugh!

I had fooled myself that I'd become incapable of experiencing these emotions. I was sure that I'd become inoculated from infatuation as if it were some childhood disease. My feelings had got so trampled upon by my divorce that I never really thought that I could fall in love again. Or if I ever did then I had always imagined that it would take months, probably even years for those tender shoots of emotion to push their way through all the bitterness and hurt my ex-husband had left me to deal with.

But, no. Whatever the cause – biology, pheromones, psychology – within ten minutes of meeting Porl, I'm wondering how many children we'll have and where we'll retire to.

I'm too old for this.

My descent into madness begins as ever with Anderson. As usual, we'd agreed to meet for lunch. To give me a break from not writing my theoretical treatise and to give him a break from whatever research paper he wasn't writing either.

And as usual, as I walked into the refectory, I realised that I'd been stood up.

Who made that law that gay men are exempt from any promise, commitment or lunch date, if they have the slightest opportunity of getting their end away elsewhere?

I eventually find him in the last place I expect: The Great Library.

‘Hey! Where were –?’ I start in an angry whisper.

Anderson doesn’t even bother to look at me, just melodramatically holds his hand up for silence. And then in his most solemn voice he says: ‘You’re just in time.’

‘I’m not just in time. You’re late. Late as in lunch date late.’

‘Watch, just watch. Perfection is before us.’

Anderson, like most men, can be the most infuriating git when he wants to be. Which is most of the time. He only gets away with his complete self-obsession by being hideously cute, built like a brick shithouse, and, not that I would know, hung like the proverbial donkey. Indeed half the male personnel of our asteroid home can attest to the latter, and almost the same number now mooch around the asteroid looking forlorn after Anderson rejected their requests for a second date. I’ve told him on many occasions that if he continues like this he will soon run out of shagging opportunities. Actually, as I stand before him, being casually ignored, I decide that if he continues to treat me like this he may eventually be in danger of losing a friend.

But in the meantime I sigh and indulge.

‘So what am I supposed to be looking at?’

‘Temporal Anthropology Studies, Aisle Four, Seat Three.’

I follow his gaze and am less than surprised to find Seat Three is occupied by a lithe young Jeillo male.

‘Lovely. Now can we have lunch?’

‘Here it comes. Heaven on toast.’

Sighing, I turn back and watch. The purple-skinned Jeillo is leaning on the back legs of his chair, rocking gently as he reads. The rocking motion has a gentle rhythm to it, building slowly until he’s only a few degrees away from toppling backwards. As he reaches the furthestmost arch of his gentle movement, even I can’t help but notice that his T-shirt comes away from the waistband of his trousers. Beneath is revealed the first of three pairs of perfectly formed abdominal muscles, a tiny thread of dark crimson fur running between them.

I have to admit, it’s almost worth missing lunch for.

Anderson sighs melodramatically, and swoons against a bookcase. ‘Now I can die happy,’ he purrs.

‘What? Without shagging him blind and then throwing him out in the middle of the night, never to speak to him again? How unlike you.’

‘This one I can’t speak to. I’d be forced to wrestle him to the ground and strip him naked.’

‘The librarians do tend to frown on that.’

‘You go talk to him for me.’

‘To say what? My friend fancies you? I don’t think so.’

‘Just to see which side of the bed he sleeps on?’

‘Read my lips. No.’

Two minutes and a scuffle later, I’m being propelled towards Aisle Four, Seat Three. For a moment I stand there waiting for the Jeillo man to notice me, because I have absolutely no idea what to say. Finally I settle on a polite cough. Unfortunately this has the disastrous effect of making him jump out of his seat, and then topple backwards on to the floor in a pile of books and data cubes.

Several librarians shush us.

Apologising profusely I reach down to help him up.

His hand is warm and smooth. I pull him to his feet, and for just one second we’re standing way too close to each other, looking right into each other’s eyes.

His are lilac. I can almost feel mine dilate.

He grins, looks right into my enlarged pupils and says: ‘If you wanted to get me on my back, you only had to ask.’

His name is Porl Tomas. And he is one arrogant son of a bitch. One of those men who thinks the sun shines out of their backsides. So sure of himself, so cocky. The kind of man that whatever his name actually is, it always spells out trouble. In large capital letters. Exactly the sort of man that my mother would no doubt have warned me about had she had the chance. I decide on the spot to avoid him like the plague.

We’ve had dinner three times this week.

It’s all getting out of hand. I’ve had to restrain myself from writing his name in big bubble letters on the back of my diary. I feel about sixteen. Which is only half the problem.

While emotionally I may have reverted to a teenager, physically I cannot hide the fact that I’m still a couple of decades older. And it shows. A lifetime of expeditions and misadventures has left my poor excuse for a body scarred, scratched, bruised and scorched. The bullet wound in my left shoulder may have faded from livid pink to paper white, but there’s no hiding the ugly pucker of skin it’s left behind.

I get out of the bath and examine myself in the mirror. No wonder it’s been years since I’ve taken my clothes off in company. If you squint, my body looks like a map of the surface of this asteroid.

Porl on the other hand is perfect. Well, the bits I’ve seen so far seem perfect. I’ve only been able to fantasise a thousand times about the rest of him. Oh Goddess, perhaps he doesn’t fancy me? Maybe he just wants to be friends?

I reach for my pen, feeling genetically predisposed to scrawl his name in big bubble letters again.

Oh get a grip, woman!

A quick survey of my wardrobe still fails to produce anything that could be described as date wear. In the end, I pull on jeans and my

favourite orange hooded top. If I can't be glamorous, I can at least be comfortable.

There's a sign pinned to his door. It reads: 'Meet me at the Observatory. P.'

So I do.

The Observatory is a clear dome, a kilometre in diameter, that sits on the surface, in the middle of one of the areas that haven't been terraformed yet. There are small installations for astronomical research out there, but mostly it's just rock, and the atmosphere is still retained artificially within the terraformed areas, so the sky is just space. It gives the unsettling impression of walking on the rugged ground without a space suit.

Porl's prepared a picnic. Mostly fruit, cheese and some wine. He's spread out on a rug, lying on his back with his eyes closed. If I'd been organising this, I would have been pacing up and down by now wondering if I was going to be stood up. Porl appears to be so concerned that he's actually fallen asleep.

'Is this a private picnic or can anyone join in?'

His grin spreads like a Cheshire cat.

'Can you see that star?'

I look up – there are several million visible through the dome.

'Can you be a bit more specific?'

'Lie down next to me, and I'll show you.'

Oh aye.

But I do as I'm instructed, and immediately become aware of his shoulder touching mine through our clothes.

Oh I wish I could just grow up. I'll be carving our names on the rocks next.

He starts to describe the patterns above us, finally drawing my attention to a small star at the bottom of a curve of brighter stars. It seems to flicker.

'It's not there anymore, burnt itself up, millions of years ago. We're just seeing the echo of it.'

'Is this your standard chat-up line or did you make up this one especially for me?'

He grins and props himself up on his elbow.

'It's not a chat-up line, it's my research.'

I run through our last few conversations, desperately trying to recall the work that had brought him to the Collection. Something about... nope wasn't any paying attention whatsoever.

I've turned into a complete airhead. Somebody shoot me.

I realise that once again I'm not listening. And then suddenly I am because I catch the following...

'...don't you think that that's the strangest way to make love?'

I've no idea what he's been talking about.

'Have you ever met my ex-husband?'

He giggles, I'm off the hook.

'Tell me more about it,' I continue, fishing.

'About making love?'

I manage to stop myself blushing. But he's too keen to continue to talk about his research to tease me further.

'When they met someone they wanted to spend their lives with, the marriage ceremony ended with them starting to time travel together.'

I find myself swallowing hard. 'Oh... oh really.'

'Not time-travelling as it's been conventionally theorised. But travelling back in their own lifetimes. They used a device which allowed them to re-enter their bodies at an earlier point. Braxiatel has one in his private collection. Each time they learnt something about each other, each time they found a new depth to their relationship, they would travel back and relieve their marriage from the day of their wedding, applying this new knowledge.'

'I guess you could avoid a lot of rows that way, but birthdays wouldn't be half as much fun.'

He smiles politely, but I sense that he's a little put out by my jollity.

'Just imagine – reliving every kiss, understanding each time how to better please your love. For them to better please you. Until each moment of your lives together becomes one long perfect memory.'

Which is when he leans forward and kisses me.

And despite our lack of endless rehearsal, it felt pretty good to me.

Bernice Summerfield's diary. Post-it note covering the entry for June 12th:

I've decided to play a bit hard to get with Porl, so I'm not seeing him today. I don't want to become one of those awful people who abandon their friends at the first sniff of a love affair. So Anderson and I spend some quality time together and I leave Porl to his researches.

Post-it note covering the above:

Oops.

'I'm not talking to you,' Anderson says when I find him in the reading library the following afternoon.

'But I've brought chocolate biscuits and everything.'

'You run off with the love of my life, I don't see hide nor hair of you for a week, and then you turn up here with a few tawdry snacks and expect to be forgiven.'

I do my best to look suitably chastised.

He glares at me for a long moment and then narrows his eyes. 'What kind of biscuits?'

Which is when I know that I am forgiven.

‘Chocolate fudge. I had to break into Brax’s private kitchen. I did it just for you!’ I whine. ‘I thought we could spend the day together.’

He makes a show of snatching them. ‘You’re only here because that purple-skinned harlot has booked observatory time for the next twenty-four hours.’

Ah. ‘It’s a fair cop. I’ll come quietly.’

‘Very wise with walls as thin as these.’

Which makes me fall about laughing, which makes Anderson fall about laughing. And suddenly we’re best friends again.

After much biscuit munching, I give Anderson the low down on my embryonic love affair. After we’ve dissected each second of each individual date for the possible prospects for a long-term relationship, we end up talking about the alien race Porl is studying.

‘Honey, there isn’t one relationship I’ve had that I’d be willing to relive.’

‘But if you could change the mistakes, avoid the hurt, wouldn’t that be worth it?’

‘There’s a few I’d avoid altogether. Remember Wil?’

‘Wet Wil? Who got drunk and peed the bed?’

‘The very same. I’d never have bought him that final pint, that’s for sure. What about you, Benny? If you could go back what would you do differently?’

Which inevitably makes me think about Jason. Would I have married him knowing how it would have turned out?

Would I have known what to change to have made it better?

Anderson can see that the question is in danger of making me maudlin, and suggests we go for a pint. As we get up to leave, my mind drifts to Porl and I find myself wondering if he’s as caught up with me as I am with him.

Bernice Summerfield’s diary. Post-it note covering the entry for June 13th:

Fortunately, despite the fact that the Geography Faculty was having a party I left the bar after one drink, and went home for an early night. So when I met up with Porl, I was feeling bright and fresh and we had a really great day together.

A Post-it note covers this. The writing is illegible and there is evidence of much crossing out.

I wake up – panic for a moment, because I can’t feel my legs.

Then I realise that it’s because a man I don’t recognise is sprawled over them, unconscious. Fortunately both he and I are fully clothed. I sit up to push him off me – and the mother of all hangovers slaps me

around the head, and I collapse back on to the floor and desperately try to avoid throwing up.

The bar is still full of people. None of them look in any better shape than I am. I can see Anderson on the other side of the bar, his arms around Eleanor, the fifty-year-old, overweight, Senior Geography Fellow. I leave him where he is. He deserves her. He must be responsible for how I feel, for I can't believe that I could have voluntarily done this to myself.

I crawl back to my rooms, strip, leaving a trail of clothes from the sittingroom to the bathroom. The shower feels too loud, the water tears at my fragile, paper-thin skin.

Somehow I manage to dry myself, clean my teeth, brush my hair, and put on eye-bag cover up, without once taking a look at myself in the mirror.

And then I stagger off to find Porl.

I find him eating breakfast and working through the data he's collated from his long stint in the observatory. I grab a black coffee and slide into the seat opposite.

He looks disgustingly fresh and together. I lean across, steal a slice of toast and kiss him on the lips.

'Hello you!' I say, praying that I don't look as bad as I feel.

He grins back. That wicked grin that suggests knock-off goods and good sex.

'What you been up to, babes? Keeping out of trouble...'

The words die in his mouth. The smile slips off his face. He's looking right at me. No, that's not right. He's looking a little lower, at my neck. He swallows painfully, like he's struggling to digest something. 'I see that you haven't.'

I'm lost. 'Haven't what?'

He wipes his mouth on his napkin, like he's trying to remove an unpleasant taste. He pushes his chair away from the table. It's a violent act, makes my hungover head swim.

'Forget it,' he says. 'Forget me.'

And he's gone. I sit there for a few long seconds, utterly confused. A couple of librarians are staring. When I catch their eyes, they return to nibbling at their pastries.

It's only when I return to my rooms and look in the mirror for the first time that day that I see it. The livid bruise on my neck. That trademark of adolescence.

A love bite.

Porl wouldn't answer his door or return my calls. After a day I ended up stalking him. I sat in the corridor outside his room until security came and asked me to move. There'd been complaints. They wouldn't

tell me from whom, but you didn't have to be a genius to work it out.

I've left a dozen messages on his machine. From apologies to rationalisations, to drunken abuse. Nothing works.

Nothing changes anything. I can't really apologise for what I've done, because I can't even remember the party.

After two days, Anderson calls around.

'Darling, that's so not a good look.'

I glance in the mirror. I'm wearing a grubby nightshirt and odd socks. Unkempt is the politest way to describe my hair.

I don't care. Only one thing matters. My thoughts are digging one deep agonising furrow called Porl. 'How is he? Have you seen him?'

Anderson shakes his head. 'No one has.'

I collapse on the sofa. The ache in my guts swells, threatens to become an anxiety attack.

Anderson puts an arm around me; I barely feel it. He tells me that Porl will calm down, come around. It will be okay.

But I can't believe him. It's just platitudes. Anderson hasn't seen Porl; doesn't really know. And even if Porl does forgive me, he won't ever really trust me again. I wouldn't trust him.

'It's all your fault,' I tell Anderson. 'If you hadn't made me go for that pint none of this would have happened.'

He smiles ruefully and ruffles my already ruffled hair. 'I know baby, and if I could go back, I'd have packed you off for an early night, no question.'

I stare at him.

if I could go back

'What?' he says.

Oh my God.

Braxiatel's private collection is in a wing far away from the Great Library. It contains dangerous relics, forbidden texts, forgotten weapons and all the usual stuff that men like Braxiatel keep tucked away from the greedy fingers of all the supervillains and megalomaniacs.

Only a handful of people at the institute have a passcard.

I'm one of them. It vaguely occurs to me that Brax might disapprove of my unauthorised time-travelling. But what's he going to do – shoot me?

I find the device filed away in a metal storage locker. There are no display cases here. None of this material is destined for public view. The cabinet is locked, but I jemmy it open easily. The device is a stone ring, a little larger than a bracelet. It's heavy and cool to the touch.

I stow it in my knapsack and get the hell out of there.

Of course I bump into Braxiatel on the stairs. It's four in the morning

and he's the only person on the asteroid who's both sober and still up at this hour.

'Good morning,' he murmurs, a look of puzzlement on his face. 'You're up early.'

I do my best to smile. 'Couldn't sleep.'

He reaches out a hand to my shoulder. It's an uncharacteristically demonstrative gesture from Brax. It takes me a moment to realise that he's heard about Porl. It's sympathy. Thinks I'm a heartbroken insomniac pounding the corridors to try and ward off the pain.

I smile awkwardly, murmur that I should get back to bed.

Braxiatel starts to move off but then turns back.

'Oh Benny, there's an emergency faculty meeting in the morning. Heads of departments, senior researchers. It's... well, it's about the incident with the Geographers in the bar.'

I try to look nonplussed.

'Well, it appears that someone interfered with the air conditioning. Added a rather potent aphrodisiac to the air supply. Doesn't seem to have caused any permanent harm, but it has created, well, a few blushes.'

I tell Brax that I'll be there, not intending to attend for a moment, and head off.

I feel his eyes boring into the back of my head as I go.

I'm not surprised when Porl won't open the door to me. I take out my crowbar and jemmy the lock.

It's the first time that I've been in his apartment. His rooms are in a worst state than mine. Coffee cups and clothes litter the floor. Bottles of spirits decorate the shelves. It's as if he's been feeling like I have for months.

His bedroom light flickers on and suddenly he's silhouetted in the doorway, naked and groggy with sleep. It's only been a few days since I've seen him, but my heart's in my throat.

'Go away, Benny.' He sounds tired and angry. He won't look me in the eye.

'Porl, listen to me. Just for a moment. I'm sorry for what happened. But I don't think it's all my fault. Some kind of prank. But we can learn from it.'

I show him the stone ring I've stolen.

'We don't have to let it spoil everything. We can go back and change it.'

He stares at the artefact in my hands for a long moment, and then finally he looks me in the eyes.

'Please, Porl.'

His face is impassive. I have no idea what he's thinking.

People call love sickness heartache', but that's not where you feel rejection. Your heart only responds to excitement and fear – racing, pounding, skipping beats. You feel rejection in the pit of your stomach. It's like the moment you realise that you've eaten bad food, and you know that all you've got to look forward to is a night of twisted torment and twisted sheets.

The time-travelling aliens never had to experience rejection, because they could alter their relationships before either party's love began to fade. Eternal love. No reason for pain, no need to experience the wound of rejection. Just endless, enduring love.

With their technology there's no reason ever to feel rejection again. It's a crime that that technology is locked away, when there are people suffering in the universe.

When I am suffering.

Extract Ends

I'm vaguely aware that Benny is crying, but I can't take my eyes off the device she's holding out towards me. Holding it out like a peace-offering.

I didn't plan for this. Didn't dream for one second that she would just turn up and present the artefact to me. I thought it was going to take weeks of exhibiting mistrust of her, before she would fear that the relationship was damaged beyond repair, and suggest that that we go back and wipe the slate clean.

She's looking at me expectantly. It takes me a moment to realise that she's waiting for my answer. I make a show of looking compromised, hurt and uncertain, but all I can think is that now I'll get to see Rebecca again.

Get to go back and change all those stupid mistakes.

Bernice walks towards me. Touches my face. I smile back at her. No longer sure how she is expecting me to behave.

She takes my smile as a gesture of reconciliation and begins to kiss me.

I let her guide me back into the bedroom. She pulls me down on to the bed. I'm only barely aware of the sensation of entering her; my mind is full of Rebecca.

Rebecca and I were together for a year and half. We only rowed twice. Both times I left her. I was never in love with her. I liked her and we were good friends. We used to spend all our weekends lounging in our

underwear in my apartment, watching movies and eating pizza.

I used to look at her and wish that I could fall in love with her. Wish that some magic would be cast that would make me love her with the same intensity that she loved me.

The way she used to look at me used to make me wish that I was her. I was jealous of all the love she had. All the pleasure she got from just being with me.

After we split up the first time, I only went back to her because I was lonely. And, if I'm honest, because another girl I dated for a while had dumped me.

Six months later I left her again. She sat on my sofa, crying, and begged me not to do it. Twice I put her through the pain that I feel now. No wonder that when I asked her back a third time, she just couldn't do it.

She tried. She left her new boyfriend to come back to me.

But it wasn't the same. I'd hurt her too many times for her to be able to feel all that love again. She was cold, distant.

Didn't want to touch me. Flinched when I tried to initiate sex.

And the more she pulled away, the more I desired her.

After months of being her boyfriend, finally I fell in love with her. But only after she had fallen out of love with me.

By the time she finally left me to go back to her ex-boyfriend, I had become so needy, so desperate for all that beautiful love she no longer felt that I had a breakdown and physically collapsed.

And now that doesn't have to happen. No pain. No breakdown. All I have to do is take us back to the moment when I first left her. When her love was strongest and most pure. When that stupid row starts, I can soften and smile, instead of using it as an excuse to leave her. Because this time, I'll be in love. And she'll be in love with me.

We'll be together.

Bernice climaxes beneath me, breaking my chain of thought.

She murmurs that she loves me as she plants a series of kisses on my shoulder. She's not said those words to me before.

They feel distant, as if they have nothing to do with me at all. I wait until her breathing slips into the regular rhythm of sleep, before I move her arm from around me and slip out of bed.

Bernice Summerfield's Diary. Several blank Post-it notes hide the extended entry for June 16th:

I wake in the darkness. There's lots of noise. It's banging, coming from the other room. For a moment, I wonder who's come to call on me. Perhaps I'm late for something. I usually am. And then I realise that I'm not at home, I'm in Porl's bed, Porl's room.

No Porl.

I stumble for the light. It takes me a few seconds to find it.

I wrap the sheet around me and head for the door.

Braxiatel's standing there, fully dressed, looking serious.

He's flanked by two equally serious-looking security men.

Anderson is hovering in the background. He gives me a little smile. Like he knows something that I'm not going to like.

They've come for Porl. I tell them he's not here. Brax pushes past me. It takes me a moment to realise that he's not going to take me at my word. He's going to search the room anyway.

'Where's the artefact, Benny?' he asks. His voice is businesslike.

Feeling exposed and vulnerable, I pull my sheet tightly around me. I can't see the stone ring, don't remember where Porl left it.

'Where would Porl go?' Braxiatel asks.

'What's going on? What's he done? He didn't steal it, I did.'

Brax nods, distractedly. 'I know what you did. Porl Tomas polluted the air conditioning in the bar.'

Anderson moves over to me, gives an apologetic shrug.

'He wanted – needed you to be unfaithful.'

I try to digest this information, but it doesn't make sense.

'What?'

'Now where would he go?' Braxiatel asks.

The answer's obvious. Porl spent all his free time in the Observatory. When he wasn't in my bed.

I look Brax right in the eye. 'The Great Library, Temporal Anthropology section. That's where he spends most of his time.'

Braxiatel nods at the security men, who head off. He starts after them and then turns to me.

'We'll speak later,' he says. And then he's gone.

Three words. They sound like the verdict of a court.

I arrive at the Observatory. It's deathly quiet. It's like walking out on to the surface of a moon.

I find Port in the small outcrop of rock where we had our picnic. He's kneeling down on the ground, cupping the stone ring with his hands.

He must have heard me coming, because he glances in my direction before returning his concentration to the ring.

'What are you doing?' I ask. 'Why didn't you wake me?'

He doesn't answer. His eyes are closed and his forehead furrowed with concentration.

'Porl? For the Goddess's sake, Porl! What's going on?'

I come to a halt as the stone ring in his hands begins to glow with a soft amber light.

All I know is that whatever he's doing doesn't involve me, doesn't involve us.

I reach down to take the ring out of his hands.

'Don't,' he hisses.

His tone makes me recoil. 'Then tell me what's going on!'

He opens his eyes a fraction. I can't see his lilac pupils.

'I've got to go back. Got to go back to before I crushed all her beautiful love. I want her so much. I can't bear this terrible pain. Don't stop me having it again, now that I know how much it's really worth. I love her, Bernice. I love Rebecca.'

Rebecca?

I've never heard him say that name before, but it's like ice into my heart. And even though I don't understand what has happened, I hear with a terrible clarity that he doesn't love me, has never loved me.

Rage erupts out of me. Anger and hurt and pain and humiliation: an intensity of feeling that I didn't think it was possible for me to experience.

I kick the artefact out of his hands. He screams and makes a dive for it. But I've thrown myself on to him before he can close his hands around it. And then I'm pummelling his face with my fists. He only struggles for a second, and then he just lets me hit him and hit him, as if he just doesn't care any more.

Anderson pulls me off, holds me back. Porl stays on the floor, tensed up in a foetal curl.

'I wish I'd never met you!' I spit.

I'm distracted by the stone ring, lying a few feet away on the rocky ground. As I said those words it began to glow again with its soft amber light.

It's an offer.

I don't have to have met him. I can slip back to the day I met Porl. Just decide to go and have lunch on my own. Leave Anderson staring at the handsome purple-skinned man in the Great Library.

All these terrible feelings could be wiped out in a moment.

I pick up the artefact. It glows brighter in my hands, anticipating my thoughts and desires.

Porl's staring up at me now. I look him right in the eye, and then let the stone ring fall from my hands.

He winces as it shatters into a thousand pieces.

I try and think of something to say to him. Something final. Something that will hurt. But there's nothing.

I just walk away, never once looking back.

Of course I smashed it. Can you imagine how things would be otherwise, now Brax knew how it worked? The knowledge would get out. Everyone; or

worse, not everyone; would have the chance to just pop back in time and have another go at whatever emotional hoo-hah had wrecked their lives in the first place.

That was, of course, exactly the altruistic thought running through my head when I did that.

There, that's me rewriting history.

Besides, I used to hang around with someone who did that on a full-time basis, and it didn't seem to sort out his life at all. just the opposite.

Don't ask about what happened to me because of all that. It's all very dull. You can imagine it for yourself. Lots of nights and days that made no sense; for quite a long time in a row. I'm not sure if it was weeks or months. I only got past it because of the incident that I'll add in a while, the big one I'm kind of orbiting and leading up to and trying to fit in and talk about before dawn, around which time I daresay my privacy will end.

I was so utterly in love. So lost. It really killed me. Again.

I think the above all makes sness. Hard to go over it on the voice recorder eight times to make sure. Sorry. Too much ice cream. Next; the coffee ice cream. Needed less slaughter. But some; you know. Rain forests. And stuff.

Goddess, if those two weren't going to kill me, I'd just be too knackered to meet this deadline. Wonderful motivational tool.

Next time I have students, I'll pack a gun. Not that I really know how to use one now. My old skills have atroph... atro... artoo...

I'm no good any more.

I was so utterly in love. So lost. It really killed me. Again.

I remember there being a Christmas sometime after that.

Anyway, I hate Christmas, right? No big reason, just... tinsel.

You know?

7: Christmas Spirit

By Cavan Scott and Mark Wright

‘Humbug.’

Professor Bernice Summerfield stood on the steps of the Mansionhouse, overlooking the rolling garden terraces that made up the grounds of the Collection. Her mouth hung open in an expression somewhere between complete bewilderment and abhorrent disgust.

The Braxiatel Collection had been transformed into a dirty great Christmas card!

Every inch of the lovingly created gardens had been dusted with a blanket of crisp white snow, punctuated by holly trees that had erupted overnight. The air was alive with the sweet song of robins, and, as if that wasn’t enough, a large lake, teeming with skaters whose laughter caught on the breeze, had formed at the base of the recently constructed clock tower. To cap it all, carefully hidden speakers spewed forth insidious twentieth-century Christmas music. Benny thought she recognised the singer – Val Doonican was it? ‘Brax,’ she said, ‘you’ve gone too far this time.’

‘Wasn’t Brax, Professor.’

‘Hmm?’ Benny hadn’t noticed Mister Crofton, the Collection’s head gardener, working at the bottom of the stairs.

He was clearing away a path in the snow and, even in this climate, was stripped to his shirtsleeves, his faithful wheelbarrow standing not too far away.

‘Sorry, Mister Crofton,’ Benny apologised, crunching her way down the steps to join him. ‘I didn’t see you there. What wasn’t Brax?’

‘This.’ A gnarled hand waved around at the seasonal tableau. ‘All Mr Naismith’s idea,’ he grunted, the derision in his voice barely disguised. ‘Thinks it’ll be good PR having a traditional Earth Christmas, what with so many Terrans around at the moment. Mr Braxiatel thought it was a good idea.’

‘I’ll bet he did,’ sighed Bernice grimly. ‘I hate Christmas.’

‘Not too keen meself,’ Mister Crofton agreed, resting glumly on his shovel. ‘It’ll take for ever to get the grounds back the way they were.’

The pair stood in the bright morning sun, conversation drying. Benny had a lot of time for the gardener, but sometimes conversation with him could be a little one-sided.

‘Going to the memorial service?’ Mister Crofton eventually said.

‘Better show my face, I suppose.’

‘Poor lad.’

‘Oh, I didn’t really know him. I was only on the dig to Anibus as a favour to Brax. Still, nasty way to go. That crevasse wasn’t exactly small.’ She thought for a moment.

‘I’ve never known a hover bridge to give out like that.’

Mister Crofton nodded as if he knew exactly what Bernice was talking about. ‘Well, you’d better get a shift on. It started ten minutes ago.’

‘What?’ Benny looked at her watch. ‘Goddess!’ she cursed, and broke into a run across the terrace, little snow storms kicking up as she went.

Behind her, a snowball exploded on to the wall just above Mister Crofton’s head. ‘Oi!’ shouted the gardener, striding off towards the perpetrator, shovel hefted threateningly.

The hallowed halls of the multi-faith chapel rang with the crescendo. When the final note of Glasst’s Requiem sounded, over one hundred and fifty heads turned as Irving Braxiatel walked to the podium and stopped beside the holographic profile of the late student.

Brax turned to the silent hall to begin his tribute.

‘Today is a sad, sad day for all of us...’

The words tumbled into Tony Deek’s ears, but collapsed into meaningless noise before they could reach his brain.

‘...a bright light has been extinguished...’

No one fidgeted. No one whispered. All eyes were either on Braxiatel or on Steven’s image. Tony felt as if he were going to explode. His heart was attempting to burst through his rib cage and sweat ran like a river down his brow. The panic attack had set in as soon as he had crossed the threshold and seen the hologram. Even now, he was desperately fighting the urge to stand up and start yelling at the top of his voice that this was all a mistake and they shouldn’t be here.

‘...we will never know what achievements Steven would have accomplished in the years to come...’

Steven’s fiancée, Vivian, was sitting next to Tony. How the hell could she remain so calm? Her blue eyes shone brightly, and her wonderful chestnut hair cascaded perfectly down to her shoulders. And... yes, she was smiling. He looked closer, to be sure – her lips betrayed the faintest hint of a smile. She appeared so... content. No one would guess that she had just lost her lover,

‘...but we can celebrate his life, short though it was...’

Tears now joined the rivulets of sweat that had reached his cheeks as an invisible hand started clawing at Tony’s insides.

Slowly, he forced himself to look back up at the hologram hanging in the air beside Braxiatel’s head. Steve was gazing off to the right,

laughing at something in the distance, as the wind ran through his hair. Oh, Steve, Steve... Just as I remember you...

‘...in many ways Steve will never leave us...’

Tony thought his imagination was playing tricks on him. It had to be.

Steve’s holographic head was turning. Until his eyes rested on Tony.

Perhaps it was the imaging department, showing off.

Yeah, that was it. Hardly appropriate though. For that matter, why would they program the hologram to silently mouth Tony’s name?

Tony glanced around. Why hadn’t anyone else noticed?

Even Viv was still sitting there, as serene as ever.

Panic threatening to engulf him, Tony snapped back to the hologram.

It had changed. The eyes were dead and the colour had drained from Steven’s protected face. The laughter was gone, replaced by dark blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth, now grinning maniacally. Tony started to get up, unsteady, his legs suddenly feeling like jelly.

The head exploded into a banshee wail, the skin stripping away in an eruption of blood that left just a howling, bleached-white skull.

Tony froze for a second and then joined in the screaming as the spectre charged at him.

The pile of manuscripts, papers and data-disks finally surrendered to the forces of gravity and avalanched across the desk, sending a pot of hot, sweet tea hurtling over the side. Bernice swore.

Grabbing the dust pan and brush from under her complex filing system – also known as a heap of manila folders – she started to gather up the remains while the tea soaked into Brax’s all-too-expensive rug. Tony Deeks didn’t even get up to help. That’s okay, thought Benny through gritted synapses, he’s doped to high heaven after his outburst at Steven’s memorial service. She could dance a mambo stark-naked and he wouldn’t bat a drugged-up eyelid. She tipped the china shards into the wastebin. Just have a chat with Tony, will you, Benny, Brax had asked. The boy looks up to you. You’re his hero. I’m sure you can get through to him.

Some hero. She’d have more chance of breaking into the Central Treasury Asteroid than finding out what was going on inside Tony’s head. Time for a different approach.

‘How are the Psi-Tests going, Tony?’

‘Hmmm?’

‘The Psi-Tests?’ Benny prompted, wondering at that moment why anyone would examine Tony’s mental ability.

‘The experiments you’ve been doing with Dr Yackle over in the

Grand Trianon? Are you making progress?’

Tony turned his vacant gaze back to the window. Snow was falling heavily now, and across the lawn ornate ice-sculptures had appeared from nowhere.

‘Fine, thank you, Professor. The doctor says I have a unique mind. He thinks I might be an... a...’

Complete moron? considered Benny, unhelpfully.

‘...natural em path. Yeah, that’s what he said.’

‘I see, Tony.’ Benny nodded professionally. ‘And does Dr Yackle think that these experiments have anything to do with your, er, problem a couple of days ago?’

Tony’s head snapped back to face her, eyes wide as if he’d only just remembered the events in the chapel. His words spilled out in a breathless rush. ‘Problem? Er, no, I haven’t seen him for a couple of days.’

‘It’s okay, Tony. I’m only trying to help.’ Benny reached out and put a comforting hand on Tony’s shaking shoulder. His shirt was clammy with sweat. How could someone go from being a vegetable one second to a nervous wreck the next?

‘And actually, I have my own questions to ask. I want you to think very carefully. Did you bring back anything from Anibus? There are a lot of rumours about the Anibusians and their relics. Legends say that they used to control dreams, conjure up phantoms.’

Tony’s increasingly frantic gaze shifted slightly, moving to just behind her head. Benny had to fight the urge to turn around and see what he was staring at

‘Are you sure you didn’t find anything on the dig, Tony?’ she continued, shivering slightly. It was even getting cold inside the house now. This Christmas thing was getting out of control. Tony?’

The last thing Benny expected was for Tony to pull his screaming and running out of the room trick again.

But that was exactly what he did.

The colour fled from his face. His eyes, still fixed on the mirror, doubled in size, and with a piercing shriek he bolted out through the door.

Benny could hear his yells as he tore off down the corridor.

And that, Mr Irving Braxiatel, is why I should never be asked to counsel hysterical students, thought Benny as she turned to see what had transfixed Tony.

Her face gazed back from the mirror.

Tony barrelled into the Mansion house’s main concourse, knowing exactly where Viv would be. Every day since the memorial service, she had come here, taken Steven’s favourite play from its shelf and

started to read, holed up in a quiet storage area. If Tony hadn't been busy seeing ghosts, he would probably have thought this a little odd.

Ignoring the duty Archivist's demands to keep quiet, Tony threw open the door to the storage area to reveal Vivian sitting in the corner. Her book had slipped redundantly to the floor, and she was sitting staring into thin air, gently fingering the necklace – what was it called, a Memory Stone?

– that Tony had seen Steve give her just before he died.

He skidded to halt in front of her, breathing heavily in the silence, and suddenly feeling very foolish. What was he going to say to her? Hi Viv, I've just seen the grinning face of your dead boyfriend in Professor Summerfield's mirror.

She'd think he'd gone mad.

'Haven't you?' said the voice.

Tony tried to scream but discovered that he couldn't. A hand had appeared on Viv's shoulder. Skin mottled green, knuckles bruised and broken. Tony's terrified eyes moved up the ripped sleeve that covered the arm and found himself face to face with Steve.

The skin was now brittle and cracked, and black teeth hung from bleeding gums. 'Go on, Tony. Tell Viv what you came here to say.'

Vivian just sat there, smiling to no one in particular.

Tony suddenly remembered how to scream, lunging pathetically for the back door, but he stopped short.

Steve's ghost blocked the way, smiling sweetly. 'Nowhere to run to,' he wheezed.

Tony spun again. Steve was back by Viv's side. Frantically, Tony dodged behind a bank of bookshelves.

Steve was waiting for him.

Through the back exit? Steve was behind the door.

'Nowhere to hide.'

The panic was rising. Everywhere he looked, every route out of the cramped, jumbled room, Steve was there. There was no way out.

'Pervert!'

Benny shot an angry glance at the Santa Claus who had just asked her if she wanted to sit on his lap before turning her attention back to the data-pad. The inventory of the Anibus expedition scrolled before her eyes. Broken pottery, numerous scrolls and the odd dodgy statue. Nothing that would send an apparently A-1 student doo-lally. She must have been wrong. Perhaps Tony hadn't come into contact with anything from the dig. Well, nothing that could cause his instability anyhow. No, she had drawn a blank, and that was that. Brax would have to find someone else to pick up the pieces. Her mind made up, Benny turned on her heels, ready to tell Brax that she was off the case,

when 320 pounds of fur hit her smack in the face.

‘Adrian, can’t you watch where you’re going?’ she moaned, pushing herself up from the ice. The hulking Killoran stooped to haul her up.

‘Sorry Professor,’ he rumbled, nearly gouging Benny’s back with his claws as he clumsily tried to brush the snow from her, ‘I have to fetch Ms Jones. It’s a matter of life and death.’

‘Run out of bricks for the clock tower again, have you? Jonesie’s not going to be pleased.’

‘It’s one of those students of yours. About to throw himself off the top. We have to get him down. He’s putting my workers off.’

Benny shoved past the Killoran and gazed up at the tower, rising up from the bank of the frozen lake. There, by the massive clock face, stood the tiny figure of Tony, looking for all the world as if he was about to learn to fly.

Benny sighed, closing her eyes for a second. This was turning out to be the worst Christmas ever. And that was saying something.

She turned reluctantly to Adrian Wall. ‘How do I get up there?’

‘Next time he wants to build an authentic Victorian clock tower in the Collection,’ spluttered Benny as she arrived at the summit, damp with exertion, ‘he’d better put a lift in!’

Squinting in the noonday sun, she glanced around for Tony. Not that she had any idea what she’d say to him if he were there. She just wasn’t cut out for this ‘there there, here’s a hankie’ stuff. Perhaps she should just grab him by the short and curlies and haul him back from the jaws of death. Yes, that would do it.

A gust of wind slammed shut the tiny door she had just scrambled through. Benny jumped, almost losing her footing on what could laughably be called a ledge. In the face of becoming pavement jam herself, all thought of heroics did a runner. If she looked down, even for a second, she could wave goodbye to the muffins she’d had for breakfast and most of her marbles to boot. No, the only realistic course of action would be to sweet-talk the loon and get off the ledge as soon as humanly possible.

Clutching on to a handy gargoyle, Benny eased her way around the corner of the tower.

There he was. Benny had seen this kind of thing in hundreds of films. The nutter, resolved to go and meet his maker, stands on the precipice to oblivion, threatening all and sundry not to come any nearer or he’ll jump. Tony, on the other hand was just sitting there, knees hugging his tear-stained face and sobbing as if sobs were on special offer and would be out of stock tomorrow. Flinging himself off the side of a clock tower looked to be the last thing on his mind. He just sat there, breaking his heart and pulling on hers, all the time

rocking back and forth.

It was only as she inched forward that Benny could hear that the sob's were broken up by one phrase, repeated over and over again.

'He's everywhere. He's everywhere.'

'Who's everywhere, Tony?' Benny asked softly, happy that the lad had at least fed her the first line. 'Who are you talking about?'

The boy didn't look up – he didn't even stop rocking – and yet, in a weak, broken croak, he replied, 'It's Steven. He wants me dead. He wants to take me with him.'

Benny crouched beside Tony, her mind trying to forget the vertigo that was doing its damndest to topple her over the edge.

'Tony, look at me,' she soothed, trying to muster some semblance of concerned authority.

A pair of puffy, blood-shot eyes stared pleadingly into hers.

'Steve is dead. He died on Anibus. What you're experiencing is something to do with the Anibusians. I'm not sure what that is yet, but I do know that Steve is not trying to kill you, because he's already dead.'

'Then why is he standing behind you?'

Benny's head snapped around so fast that she almost lost her footing, and her eyes widened in shock. There, behind her, stood Steven, soulless eyes boring into her, his clothes torn and bloody. Under translucent skin, empty veins pulsed blue and his hair, even though the wind had dropped, was stirred by some unearthly breeze.

'Have you told her?' the spirit wheezed; cracked, blackened lips drawing back into a rabid snarl. 'Have you explained how you killed your best friend?'

Benny drew herself back up, standing between the vision and Tony who, white with panic, was trying to hide himself, moving dangerously close to the edge. 'Now, look, I don't know what you are...'

'He knows.' The phantom tilted its decaying head to indicate the terrified student. 'You know why I'm here, don't you, Tony, old friend?'

Tony seemed so frightened now that he had wrapped his arms tight round Benny's leg, as if hanging on for dear life – which wasn't that far from the truth.

'It wasn't my fault, Steve!' he wailed at the apparition. 'I didn't mean for you to die. I didn't mean to kill you!'

Hang on, thought Benny, that's a new one. 'Tony, what do you mean?' she enquired, whilst gently extricating her leg from his vice-like grip. 'Steve's death was an accident.'

'It was a game we played.' Without the anchor of Benny's leg, Tony had gone back to hugging his knees. 'We always tried to beat each

other.'

'What kind of game?'

'Yes, Tony, what did we play?' the spirit hissed.

'Will you please just shut up!' Benny shot the spirit her deadliest glare before turning back to Tony. 'Go on.'

'We were always trying to get one up on each other. Get the first prize, beat each other to the goal, you know? Anibus was our last chance – we were being split up after that, taking up our first real postings all over the system. I really wanted to get to the dig before Steve, because he always managed to hold me up somehow.'

The truth was starting to dawn upon Benny. 'What did you do, Tony?'

His words came as a low, trance-like mantra. 'We had to cross the Boreem crevasse. I had found a way around it below, but Steve wanted to set up a hover bridge. That was my chance. I knew how careful he was with equipment checks, so I knocked off a stabiliser...' The sobs began to return, and Tony stared straight into the sightless eyes of the phantom. 'I thought he'd check it!' he screamed at the haggard vision before him.

Benny didn't need Tony to finish the story – her mind flashed up a slide-show compilation: the bridge snaking over the crevasse, an enthusiastic Steven bounding across, a booted foot stepping out to a bridge that was no longer there, and the silent cry of a two thousand foot drop.

She closed her eyes and winced. When she opened them, Tony was looking up at her, seeking absolution. 'It was only a game,' he breathed.

The spirit of Steven stepped forward, and Tony cowered away, screwing his eyes tight against some unseen pain.

'No!' it wailed. 'He killed me because he was jealous – of me, of everything that I would have achieved. He knows in his heart of hearts that he's a nobody. A nobody! I must be avenged!'

The spirit pounded its chest in anger. Ignoring the sound of cracking ribs, Benny's eyes narrowed as she noticed for the first time the pendant hanging around its neck.

The Memory Stone.

'Goddess!' cried Benny, shocking both Tony and Steven into halting their respective wailing and gnashing of teeth.

'I've been so stupid. It's the Memory Stone.'

She stepped towards the phantom for a closer look, but realised that probably wasn't a smart idea. 'I assumed it was a fake,' she mused to herself, 'but it can't have been...'

It was all starting to fit together, but something was still missing, something obvious...

Benny seized upon her subject eagerly, squatting down next to Tony, kidnapping the boy as a surrogate student.

‘Now listen, you’re not cracking up – this is all quite natural.

Well, it would be if you were Anibusian.’ The terrified Tony stared back at her as if she were the mad one, but Bernice garbled on, too excited to stop now. ‘The ancient Anibusians used the Memory Stones in mourning rituals after the loss of a loved one. Clever idea really – one stone is worn by the mourner, the other remains with the corpse...’ Benny cast a nervous glance in the direction of Steve. The spectre just stood there, grimacing. Waiting. ‘The stones are psionically resonant, whatever that means, and attuned to the mind of the wearer, the upshot being that a perfect, happy image of the deceased is projected. If I’ve got this right,’ she struggled to remember her Anibusian history, ‘as the mourner gradually lets go and comes to terms with the death, the resonance dissipates, until finally the psionic image fades, leaving you with a lovely bit of jewellery at the end of it all.’

‘But I’m not Anibusian.’ Tony offered, obviously wondering what the hell she was talking about.

‘Yes! And that’s the point, Tony my lad. Memory Stones were never designed to be used by humans, especially not humans with the latent telepathic abilities you’ve got. The powers you’ve been testing must have monkeyed around with the Stone’s resonance field somehow, creating this thing.’ She jabbed a finger in Steve’s direction. ‘Don’t you see, Tony? This isn’t Steven’s ghost. It’s your own guilt over his death, manifesting itself as a vengeance-thirsty wraith out for your blood.’ She blew out a long breath, suddenly exhausted. ‘It’s quite interesting really.’

‘So he’s not real?’ Tony whimpered.

‘No more than Father Christmas. All we need now is to find the other half of the stone. That’s – Oh!’ She froze as the thought struck her, then slapped her palm against her face, uttering an expletive so strong that even the spirit blushed.

‘What’s wrong now?’ moaned Tony.

‘The other half – Viv’s wearing it. That’s why she’s been so damned calm about everything. The stone’s got to her as well, helping her get over Steven’s death.’

‘A good thing, surely?’ enquired the ghost.

‘You stay out of this,’ Benny snapped at it. ‘Tony, think about it. If the gem can drive you this near to losing everything, just think what it can do to Vivian, especially in her state. We’ve got to find her.’

‘No need,’ grinned the spirit, floating aside to reveal a newcomer to the ledge. ‘She’s already here.’

Vivian, hair tousled from sleep and clothed only in a nightdress,

stepped forward towards the edge. The second Memory Stone glinted around her neck.

‘Viv!’ yelled Benny. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing? I can’t cope with too many bodies up here. I’m struggling as it is.’

The girl’s voice came back slurred and uneven, as if she’d found herself on the wrong side of a bottle of whisky. Which was where Benny desperately wanted to be at this moment in time. ‘I need to be with him.’

‘Who...?’ Benny, desperately attempting to remain in control of the situation. Then her question tailed off. ‘Oh. I might have known.’

In the crisp winter air before the girl, another image of Steven had appeared. There was no decayed, rotting flesh this time. This Steven was handsome, glowing with health and, Benny noticed, stark naked. Not bad, thought the Professor appreciatively, glancing at his perfectly proportioned torso before catching herself. Okay, she thought, eyes rolling heavenward, explanation time again.

‘That’s not Steven, Vivian. It’s just an illusion.’

Vivian wasn’t listening. She was inching ever closer to the edge, hand outstretched, her eyes never leaving her Steven’s face.

‘No, he’s waiting for me... Waiting for me on the other side.’

Benny wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take.

On one side she had Tony, scared witless of the phantom of his best friend who he’d accidentally killed. On the other, the best friend’s girlfriend, about to step out into oblivion because her perfect, angelic Steven, with his perfect looks and amazingly long – behave, Benny! – was calling her to the other side.

Merry Christmas, Professor Summerfield.

Time slowed down as it does when too many actions try to cram into too few seconds.

The beautiful, naked Steven beckoned to his love.

The demonic Steven lunged at Tony.

Tony screamed.

Vivian began to step over the edge.

Benny threw herself at the silly, suicidal bint.

Below, exactly seventy-three passers-by strained their necks up and gasped.

Bernice Summerfield curled her hand around the Memory Stone hanging from Vivian’s neck and yanked it away, feeling the chain snap beneath her fingers.

Night fell.

Benny threw out a hand to steady herself.

She was still standing on the tower. But Tony, Vivian and the spirits had gone. That wasn’t all. Below her, she could see the lake, but, as

far as her eyes could see, snow-covered fields rolled into the horizon. Everything else had vanished.

The throng of people below, the Mansionhouse, everything.

All that rose up from the blanket of white was a church, forlornly pealing its Yuletide bells in the distance.

Above them, the moon shone down on the scene, its brilliance reflecting in the frozen lake below. The moon?

Earth's moon?! What the hell was that doing there?

Nervously, Benny fingered the Memory Stone, resting cold in her hand. The chimes rang thirteen and Benny suddenly realised that she could feel the gap between her clothes and her skin. Every hair on her body was standing to attention.

She turned, heading for the steps, and almost tripped over the body lying on the floor.

Its limbs were twisted at obscene angles, its face covered by a mask of blood and sand.

Steven.

'Professor Summerfield!' the corpse announced, its cracked wound of a mouth splitting into a crimson grin of recognition. 'What are you doing here?'

'Oh, you know,' Benny replied, ignoring the fact that a mouse was crawling from a hole just above Steven's temple.

'Just taking in the view.'

With the sound of bones popping back into empty sockets, the creature pulled itself to its feet.

'Well, this is nice,' Benny said, rocking nervously on her heels. 'I suppose I should ask what a lovely cadaver like you is doing in a place like this.'

'Ask me what I am, what I represent,' commanded the figure before her, his jaw threatening to break from his head and fall to shatter on the flagstones.

'Oh, I know what you are. You're the representation of some deep-seated insecurity or resentment that this...'

Benny waved the Memory Stone at Steven, 'thing has pulled from my psyche.'

Steven threw his head back and wailed a sorrowful lament.

'Why do you doubt your own senses?' he moaned, tears welling in his unseeing eyes. 'I am the spirit of Steven Mead!'

'Oh, cut the Jacob Marley act,' snapped Benny. 'You're no more a ghost than I'm Charles Dickens. You're just the result of watching far too many Alastair Sim movies. I'm surprised you haven't whipped out your chains for a quick rattle.'

'Would that help?' asked the spectre.

'No! Now listen. You've been conjured up by an ancient mystical

relic and while, technically, I know you're just doing your job, neither Tony or Vivian need your help. In this case, Steve, ancient mystical relics should be seen and definitely not heard.'

Benny braced herself for the next wail, but nothing came.

Steven shrugged and began to absent-mindedly pick at a fingernail.

'What do you care, anyway?' he finally asked, staring at the finger he'd inadvertently managed to dislocate.

'Sorry?'

'You didn't even know these kids did you? Only saw them for the first time the day I died. Did they ask for your help?'

'Well, no. But...'

'Exactly. These kids mean nothing to you and yet here you are, sticking your oh-so-cute little nose in, trying to sort out the problem.'

'Now hold on a second,' yelled Benny, 'I appreciate the nose compliment, but I was asked to do this. I don't want to see them die.'

'Not good enough,' came the reply. 'This isn't about being asked. This is about Bernice Summerfield, saviour of the universe. See a kitty up a tree? Have to climb up after it. Spot a race on the brink of extinction? Oops. Better put that right.'

'And that's a bad thing, is it?'

'Oh it is, Benny. It is when you're only saving others and you can't save yourself.'

Suddenly Benny wasn't so sure. 'I don't understand.'

But the spectre was gone. She was alone again. It had started snowing.

'Come on Bernice,' Benny hissed from between clenched teeth. 'It's just trying to get under your skin. Pull yourself together.'

'Won't you cry for me, Benny?' asked a voice from behind.

Benny turned on her heel to see...

'Jason. Oh very clever. Throw up my own personal demon. But, to be honest, I preferred it when you were a rotting worm-feast. Far more attractive.'

'Do you cry for me, Benny?' Jason asked again.

'You're not real either.'

'Do you help all the other lost souls because you couldn't save yourself? Couldn't save the most important part of your life?'

'Oh please!' she spat. 'Have you nipped back in time to shack up with Freud? Perhaps I should pop back myself and tell Sigmund where to stick his pipe.'

'I'm not dead, Benny. You know that, don't you?'

Benny found her eyes hurting from the strain of holding back the tears. 'This isn't about me.'

'Don't you need me any more?'

Bernice looked into those big, brown eyes that had trapped her so

many times. Pleading. Begging. It was tearing her in two. The rational, academic side of her mind was putting up a good fight, telling her that this was pathetic, reminding her what this was standing before her. Yet, when she tried to speak, she heard just a whisper.

And all the time Jason was stepping forward until she was balancing on the edge.

‘You lost me, Benny, just as you lost everyone you ever cared for.’

Suddenly, for Benny, all the pity and the loss vanished in a second of crystal clear anger.

‘Bad choice of words,’ she said.

She swept her arm back and flung the amulet at the spirit’s head.

It passed through the apparition, pushing aside Jason’s features as though they were smoke.

The Memory Stone struck the surface of the lake. The ice fractured, exploding upwards into a silvery storm.

As she lost consciousness and her surroundings seeped away into oblivion, the last thing Bernice heard was a clock striking thirteen.

In the darkness, you could just make out the Victorian clock tower, nestling in the grounds of the Mansionhouse. Next to the tower, the lake, empty of skaters, looked dull and matt, no moonlight to reflect enigmatically off its frozen surface.

The clock began to chime its slow, ponderous way to midnight.

A sharp crack caused Bernice to jump from where she stood looking out of the window. She turned to survey the scene of revellers, pulling crackers and wishing each other a Merry Christmas in the shadow of the largest pine tree she had ever seen, dominating one corner of the banqueting hall.

She smiled slightly, draining the glass of bourbon clutched in her hand. Only on the Braxiatel Collection, light years from Earth and centuries off course, could you celebrate a twentieth-century Christmas, complete with crackers and plum-pudding.

Benny looked around for a refill, but she didn’t have to search far. A glass was proffered under her nose, followed by a cracker.

Irving Braxiatel stood before her; immaculate as always, a wise man bearing gifts.

‘Pull a cracker?’ he asked, one eyebrow arched, and Benny got the impression he couldn’t quite believe he was asking such a ridiculous question.

‘I’ll pass,’ she said, hiding a smile. ‘But the drink I II accept gratefully.’ She took the offered glass and sipped appreciatively. Around them, the party carried on.

‘How are you feeling?’ Brax asked, a little awkwardly.

‘Oh, you know,’ Benny shrugged. ‘Tired. Sad. I can’t help thinking about those poor kids. At least Viv will eventually get over it, and being with her family on Earth is probably the best thing for her right now. But I don’t think Tony will ever get over the guilt.’

‘There will be an enquiry into his involvement in the accident.’

‘That won’t help Steven, though, will it?’ She contemplated the dark liquid swilling at the bottom of her glass.

‘Tell me, Benny,’ Brax enquired in a way that implied she didn’t have much choice about answering the question.

‘What did you see when you held the Memory Stone?’

She’d been expecting that. Benny looked Brax straight in the eye. ‘just some ghosts and spirits.’ She knocked her head back and drained the glass, steeling herself against the bourbon’s bite. ‘Nothing important.’ She leant forward, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. ‘Merry Christmas, Brax. Now I have to go and give a cat his present.’

With that, she made her way across the now crowded dance floor, and slipped out through the ornate doors at the far end of the room.

She didn’t even notice, a few feet above her head, the sprig of mistletoe that swung there in a gentle breeze.

See what I mean about Christmas? No good to anybody, just a... festival of bad memories.

Or they would be bad. If the following story hadn’t happened between then and now.

More sober. I used one of the patches that I nicked from an old associate of mine. I only have a small stock, so I reserve them for special occasions. One simply applies the patch to a small area of skin, and all the alcohol is instantly sucked from one’s body. It takes all the fun out of having a hangover.

The first rays of the sun are giving the clock tower a shadow as I look out of my window. Soon it will be time for all good bounty hunters to wake up and brush their remaining teeth. Or tusks, or whatever those things are. Certainly I’ve had to have Joseph go and shop for several days’ worth of replacement toothbrushes. I sincerely hope I realised what was going on immediately. The alternative being that bounty hunter saliva, against all expectation, tastes not at all bad.

So it’s time for me to include this in the manuscript. It’s a little different to the other stories, in that the author, who’s an extraordinary religious recluse under a vow of silence who just uttered a monosyllabic agreement when I contacted him about the story, seems to have access to material that... well, let’s just say I don’t know how he can have discovered it. But, for reasons that will become clear in the story, I’m pretty convinced it’s all true. In fact, I know... I can feel that it’s all true.

After this happened, you see, everything changed. I’m not entirely sure

how, yet. I'm still working that out. Maybe the people they've hired to chronicle my continuing... life... will let you know what happens. I do know that it's severely going to cut down the number of dates I go out on.

Possibly.

8: The Door into Bedlam

By Dave Stone

The artificial planetoid that housed the newly-founded Braxiatel Collection was huge, on the human scale of things, and even in these early stages of occupancy, with the major exhibits still in the process of being installed, extensions, annexes and out of the way corners proliferated. It was too extensive for one person to comfortably explore in the space of a few short weeks. There were entire areas of which Bernice had but vaguely heard and far less visited: the Pyrite Chambers, the Topological Vivaria, the Skin Arboretum – that last, she sincerely hoped, being something rather different from what it sounded like.

One such place was the Repository of the Improbable, the domain of one R.F. Wilburton, associate curator. Benny knew this because it was written on the outside of the message slip she was currently delivering for Braxiatel – purely as a favour, she had pointed out, and certainly not as something so demeaning as an errand or anything like that.

As she walked through the corridors, the sounds of contract-labour building and installation work faded behind her. This wing of the Collection seemed already long-completed and furnished, the panelling and fixtures giving off the musty impression of age, an impression of having in some manner being transported back into the environs of some eighteenth-century Royal Society – though whether that had been contrived by interior decorators, or whether some bit of ancient academic architecture had simply been transplanted wholesale, it was impossible to say.

R.F. Wilburton, RcfCRS, assoc. curat, said the brass plaque on a stout-looking oaken door, being pretty much a match for the message slip. Tacked into the wood beneath it, though, was a little pasteboard sign bearing the emphatically hand-printed legend: NOT INVISIBLE !!

Well, fair enough. There were any number of things in Benny's life that weren't invisible, and she didn't doubt her capacity for dealing with one more.

There was an archaic-looking brass and ivory bell push, sunk into the door frame, which she duly pushed and was rewarded by the distant sound of the sort of bell that summoned butlers with a salver of kedgerie, toasted muffins and the morning post.

There came the tramp of shoes on bare floorboards. 'Can I help you at all?'

The voice through the door had a quavery, slightly timid edge to it;

the sort of voice one could imagine belonging to some elderly recluse with the not unfriendly but perfectly reasonable desire not to be murdered in his bed.

‘I’m Bernice Summerfield,’ Benny said brightly. ‘Professor Summerfield. I’m an, ah, associate of Braxiatel.’

‘Ah, yes...’ The voice didn’t so much hold relief as a sense of one reminding himself, quite sternly, that one’s darkest and most irrational imaginings in a perfectly safe place are just that: mere paranoid phantoms. ‘Professor Summerfield... I believe Irving mentioned... if you’ll bear with me for just one moment...’

There was the sound of an unconscionably large number of locks, bolts and security chains being released, and then the door swung open with a faint creak of disuse. Bernice stepped into a large, dimly-lit hall crammed with display cases and a rather overgrown looking tangle of larger exhibits.

Dark alcoves ran off from the walls, shadowy places in which anything could lurk, save for one which rather obviously led into a neat little bed-sitting-room, from which cheerful lamplight spilled. The general atmosphere reminded Benny of one of those second-hand bookshops that open for a grand total of two hours a week, the carpet-slipped bookseller glaring at you all the while as you wander through the rickety labyrinth of odd little staircases and doors.

‘Mr Wilburton?’ Bernice glanced around, looking for him.

‘I’m, uh, still behind the door,’ said the timid-sounding voice. There was the sound of the door through which she had entered closing. Benny turned towards it – and caught the movement out of the corner of her eye as someone, or something, scuttled off into the shadows of the gallery.

‘Did you read the sign?’ The voice now came from somewhere behind a large exhibit that seemed to be a wood and canvas water-clock as might have been designed by Leonardo da Vinci. The voice itself seemed quite anxious and insistent.

‘What, about you not being invisible?’ said Bernice. ‘Yes, I read it.’

The putative Wilburton sighed with relief. She caught another vague movement, slightly closer. She was reminded, disquietingly, of childhood fears of bogeymen and monsters, always hiding out of line-of-sight.

‘So if you’re not invisible, Mr Wilburton,’ she said suspiciously, ‘then what exactly are you?’

‘Oh, I’m as human as you are,’ the voice said hurriedly. ‘It’s just... well, it’s a bit embarrassing, really. It’s just that, for a number of years now, I seem to have become caught in a particularly vicious Markov chain of events...’

‘What?’ said Benny. In mathematics, a Markov chain is merely a

string of apparently related numbers thrown up by an entirely random generator. She peered more closely into the shadows, trying to discern the associate curator's form.

'What are you talking about?'

'It is impossible for anyone, anyone at all, to look at me directly,' Wilburton said. 'They simply don't happen to look in my direction, or get distracted at a crucial moment, or some other event transpires purely by coincidence to thwart it. It's as though the very world and its laws of cause and effect are conspiring to...'

'Pardon me?' Benny had become momentarily distracted by a rather risque little ornamental sculpture in a nearby display case, depicting some classical Grecian goddess performing what might be charitably classed as 'ministering' to, in the face of all probability, a CyberDyNix™ series-seven servomechanoid.

This was ridiculous, she thought. Wilburton's delusion seemed harmless enough, but coincidence is a product of the mind inferring patterns from the world and nothing more. It was impossible – or at least impossibly improbable – that it could be an active force.

'Listen,' she said reasonably. 'It's easy to support your theory if you spend your life hiding in all this... this clutter – but what if you were in a bare white room, say, with someone staring right at you? Look, I'll prove it to you...'

She stepped purposefully forward, consciously forcing herself to stare in the direction in which she knew Wilburton to be.

'Don't!' the associate curator exclaimed in alarm, but it was too late.

There was a creak from overhead, a crack, and then a number of heavy ceiling tiles (carelessly put up several months before and just waiting to fall down in the perfectly natural course of events) chose that moment to collapse in a shower of substandard fixing cement. Through the shadows and the clouds of cement dust – and without actually seeing anything as it were *concrete* – Benny got the distinct impression of some poor man being definitively and painfully brained.

'Don't... please don't come closer...' Wilburton managed before she could dash forward to help. There was a sharp sense of movement, and he now seemed to be behind the dark silhouette of what appeared to be a large dinosaur skeleton in a shell suit.

'Just read out Irving's message for me, if you would be so kind.'

His voice seemed remarkably collected under the circumstances, as though it were gloomily accepting the sort of circumstances that occurred every day of the week.

Bernice opened the memo slip and scanned the contents.

'Braxiatel just wants you to oversee the unloading of a transport from the Magellan Cluster. He says there are certain aspects to the cargo that fall within your field of expertise.'

A thought struck her. 'The cargo bays are on the other side of the Collection. How are you supposed to get there without people, um, *not* seeing you?'

'Shouldn't be a problem.' The voice was even further away, now. There was the approaching sound of rustling cloth and then something stepped definitively out of the gloom. A perambulatory man-sized tent. It had tassels on the canopy.

'Please feel free to stay as long as you like and look around,' the voice of Wilburton said from within. 'It's always useful for the Repository to be viewed with a fresh perspective, a different pair of eyes. Who knows what you might find?'

Jason was making the best of life in hell.

Of course, one of the more encouraging aspects of making the best of life there was that it wasn't *actually* Hell, with a capital H. It was just a world which, over the millennia, had both given rise to and been mistaken for the myths of that place by various humans who'd had the misfortune to find themselves there. Those who'd somehow managed to reverse their fortunes and make it back alive, at any rate.

In fact, it was an entire *world* in the same sense that the famous astrophysicist Dr Rupert Gilhooly had once described as: 'just where we all, like, *live*, right, and that includes all the other planets and space-stations and stuff as well – but not counting all that beggaring about with parallel Earths and other dimensions and stuff that just makes my head ache.'

It was a universe in and of its own right, and the inhabitants – you wouldn't want to call them *denizens* to their faces, if they had such – were of as much variety in form and basic temperament as those of our own.

If, in some respects, a little darker.

It was talent night at the Slathered Talon, and on the stage a multipedal necrovore was making animal balloons, which involved inflating small fur-bearing rodents with a foot pump until they burst. The smell of sulphur was in the air, spiced with the various neurasthenic and narcoleptic compounds that served the offices, here, of tobacco or hemp. Dark forms lurked or squatted or writhed together in the gloom as they performed some abstruse courting ritual.

Off to one sight, a vicious fight had broken out, a pair of what we might as well call Transubstantial Entities tearing at each other's entitic flesh with tooth and claw.

The atmosphere was almost exactly the same as any spaceport bar in Jason's own, original universe. The only real difference, he thought ruefully, was in the basic kind of travel that this bar was a way-station for. Instead of planets, this universe had bubbles in an infinity of rock.

Instead of space lanes and orbital paths, it had tunnels. This was in fact one of the main reasons that human visitors had confused it with the Underworld.

None of which, however, made the slightest bit of difference if you were stuck without so much as funds for lodging for the night, far less the fare for the mechanical mole-trains that might take you somewhere else. Jason sipped at the small brandy which had cost him his last couple of souls (the base unit of currency in these regions) and contemplated his position. There was a relatively nice succubus giving him the eye from one of the carapi on a framework of bones that served as benches. That gave him the distinct possibility of a bed for the night, or at least somewhere to spend it – but that all depended on what the succubus was particularly designed to suck...

‘Ey, you. You a *numan*, rite?’

The voice came from somewhere around Jason’s knees. He looked down to see the sort of creature that must, in all charity, be called an imp. Its wizened little monkey face looked up at him and winked.

‘You a *numan*, den?’ it repeated.

‘Last time I looked,’ said Jason. It wasn’t the best comeback in the world, but then again he’d had a bit of a trying life for the past several years.

‘So you is a numan?’ the little thing said, in the dubious tones of one to whom even the faintest breath of irony is like the touch of death.

‘Yes,’ said Jason, tiring of this. ‘Yes, I’m human.’

‘Got something for you, den.’ The imp-creature rummaged in its satchel. ‘Is touching cloth.’

‘Is it really,’ said Jason.

‘Is really.’ The imp unrolled what on first sight seemed to be a silk handkerchief, the mandala design on it glistening like the markings on a butterfly wing. ‘Is touching cloth for you to touch.’

One of the most important lessons in life is that, over a lifetime of reaching out and touching things, you will find yourself touching things ranging from the unpleasant, to the innocuous, to the pleasurable... but at some point, if you keep it up long enough, you’re going to touch something simply and instantly lethal.

Unfortunately, it’s a lesson that people only ever learn once.

There is an entirely apocryphal story told in archaeological circles, from the turn of the twentieth century, of an extensive hoard of Roman artefacts being unearthed from the foundations of a haberdasher’s shop in Colchester, the capital of Britain in Roman times. In addition to the appropriately sensational coins and jewellery and suchlike treasures there were salvers, hair combs, drinking vessels, vomiting bowls and sundry other utensils; the most complete

set of such Roman household accoutrements ever found in the British Isles.

Quite what circumstances might have had the original, ancient Roman owner piling up everything he owned and burying it under a haberdasher's shop were neither here nor there: the value in purely historical terms of such a find was nigh on incalculable.

These unearthed artefacts were promptly exhibited to the edification and delight of all concerned – until some sharp-eyed viewer noticed, and pointed out, that a large number of coins (and several drinking vessels and vomiting bowls, for that matter) were prominently stamped with the legend BC

V. The blatancy of the dating turned a simple case of forgery into a positive insult, and, in a fit of pique, the then curator of the British Museum had the entire lot sold for scrap.

It was only afterwards that some other, rather better-read observer pointed out that one of the more notable Roman Proconsuls to the British Isles at the time in question had been known as Brittanus Claudius. The Fifth. Who liked to put his name on everything he owned...

None of which actually happened, but serves as a reminder that one must be exceedingly careful of dismissing the provenance of such things out of hand. An ice-locked woolly mammoth, for example, found standing on its hind legs and wearing a big shirt saying Stop Global Cooling! might have any number of obvious explanations, most of them centred around the so-called sense of humour of undergraduate dig assistants – but what if one of those explanations, however improbable, is that it's perfectly genuine? Refuse to investigate objects for which the only explanation is something impossible like time-travel, for example, and you end up missing any number of things – the secret of time-travel, for one.

In the words of the noted xenoarchaeologist Dr Robert Gilhooly: 'Well, you know, what with all these time-dilations and parallel worlds and all those sort of swirly, wibbly things and stuff these physics guys like my brother Rupert keep going on about, you never really *know*, right, do you?'

This was the function of the Repository of the Improbable: to store and display such problematic articles as had made it into the Collection, on the basis that You Never Knew.

* * *

Bernice had gleaned this from the display notes – after some effort, the reclusive Wilburton having never quite got the hang of the mechanics of exhibiting to the public, and writing said notes on little slips of folded paper kept for safety under the kettle in his bed-sitting-

room. Thereafter, Benny wandered through the Repository at will, taking note of any such exhibit as took her fancy. In no particular order, she saw:

A statue of Sekhmet, the high Egyptian god, performing the offices of his divine station on his ceremonial pogo stick.

The Magnificent Patent Prestidigitator, a contrivance apparently manufactured by Messrs Babbage & Rosenblatt in 1841; consisting of a card-dealing automaton with a revolving ginger wig and an integral but primitive cash-register-like display of wooden tags reading 'YOU WILL LIKE

THIS' and 'NOT A LOT.'

A first-folio edition of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* by William Shaxberd, with the addition of the character Julius ('to be essayed, God willing, by noted Player and Blackamoor, Mr Samuel Jackson') who makes perfectly clear, repeatedly, the centrally thematic dichotomy of the young Hamlet's relationship with his mother.

A Rembrandt portrait of a master weaver's wife from Ghent, in which she is holding a small Sloathe from Planet X, this polymorphic creature trying and failing, spectacularly, to assume the form of an appropriately adorable long-eared spaniel.

An extensive display stand of (a carefully lettered notice said) Utterly Unclassifiable Objects. Items comprised of some substance that was not solid, or liquid, or gaseous – a substance so out of the bounds of human experience that they appeared, to the eye, to be distinct and coherent lumps of pure nothingness. Other items seemed solid, but of such a massive alien complexity that they overwhelmed the optic nerve and shut it down. Still others – seemed to have been twisted through to abstruse dimensional axes so that they appeared to recede into the distance from whichever angle they were looked upon. Each was scrupulously annotated by Wilburton's careful hand – it seemed that the associate curator was fascinated above all else by the different ways that things couldn't be technically *invisible*, but...

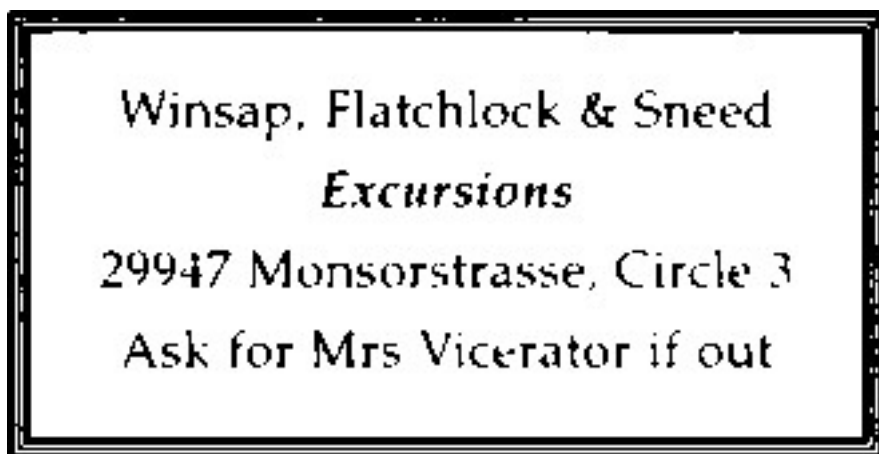
Bernice would never fully decide just what it was that made her reach out to touch a particular one of these artefacts, an irregular lump of some crystalline substance as big as her head, lit by an inner fluorescence that turned the prismatically fractured facets of it into shifting, half-formed images that might or might not have been devil faces. The little note card beside it purported it to be something called a 'joining stone', used in shamanistic rituals by the Fungus Tribes of Goron IV. The *problematic* part of its nature, apparently, was that it had been acquired from a broker about whom (after his violent, curious and somewhat spectacular death) it was discovered that he had produced almost the entire of his stock by way of a prototypical, crude and highly unstable transmogrification unit. Analysis had shown

that the artefact was unlikely to spontaneously explode and take out half a building – as had certain other of this man's wares – but it had been relegated to the Repository until such time as anyone had the time, resources and inclination to have it positively verified.

It was not, Benny would decide later, as if she had been actively drawn to this object; it was one of those inconsequential acts one simply performs... and only realise the importance of with hindsight. As it was, she just saw the pretty thing and picked it up off the stand to test its weight.

And the whole world, or certain aspects of it, changed for her.

* * *



Jason looked again at the pasteboard card. The geographical features of this dimension tended to switch themselves around on a daily basis, let alone the street maps, so address cards were more or less things in their own right, telling you where to go by certain mystical means.

‘That’s the place all right,’ it said from the little mouth which formed on its face. ‘I *told* you we were going the right way, but would you listen?’

‘Fine,’ said Jason, shortly. The card had been trying to strike up conversations, with pointed imperviosity, for several hours.

The address itself was a looming tenement building that would not have looked out of place in nineteenth-century Whitechapel. Indeed, now that the miniature sun that hung in the centre and lit this cavern-world was dimming to night, skulking things with capes and Gladstone bags were emerging and heading for a collection of creatures of the night gathered further up the street.

As a human, Jason was off-limits so far as violence by any right-thinking demon was concerned, on account of them knowing he could only die once. All the same, the occasional screams and ‘lor luv a

ducks' from the surrounding tenements set his teeth on edge.

'Look, are you going in or what?' the pasteboard card asked him. 'I mean, I'm supposed to take you in there. That's my function in life. Not one of the finest purposes in the world, I'll admit, but there you go. I was conjured up to serve and serve I shall, uncomplainingly and without...'

'If you don't shut up right this minute,' Jason told it. 'I shall go in, ask if I can use the jakes and save them on their toilet paper bill.'

'Doesn't bother me,' said the card. 'I've got a cousin who's an omnibus ticket, and you should see where they end up.'

Jason climbed the tenement steps and rang the appropriate bellpush. From inside came the terrifying ululation of an unleashed beast. Jason decided not to try the bellpush again – he didn't think his peace of mind could stand it if there were no sound.

Quietly and without fuss, the tenement door opened.

Inside, he found nothing more remarkable than a brightly-lit travel agent's office. Such places can of course hold a peculiar horror all of their own, but this was almost completely indistinguishable from the sort you'd find on any London High Street, save that the two girls undermanning the five desks weren't human and the brochures offered the holiday delights of nowhere on Earth.

Jason prepared himself for the slightly soul-destroying process of waiting until one of the girls (plump young demonesses, one with feathers, one with tiger-fur) noticed him, but was surprised when the one with feathers hustled him straight through and into a private office. In it sat a big and massively broad-shouldered man, toying with the length of touching cloth Jason had seen so recently before.

'Agraxar Flatchlock, at your service,' he said, with a pointy-toothed smile that left no doubt whatsoever as to his demonic heritage.

'Of Winsap, Flatchlock and Sneed,' said Jason, short-temperedly. 'So where are the other two?'

'Oh, there's been a little of what you might call forced restructuring,' Agraxar Flatchlock said airily. 'Let's just say, for the moment, that I alone am the head of our small concern.'

Now that his attention had been drawn to it, Jason saw that there were little moving lumps on each of Flatchlock's shoulders. Through the cloth of the suit Jason thought he heard continual, dire and muttered threats as to what was going to happen to certain people, the moment certain other people had the chance to regrow their heads.

His own head starting to spin a little, Jason turned his attention to the item in Flatchlock's hand. That cloth,' he said angrily. 'I touched it and something went into it. It started to glow. Then the little imp thing handed me your card and ran for it. Just what have you taken

out of me? Have you taken my soul or something?’

‘Really, sir!’ Flatchlock looked at him with the expression of one too polite to respond to a serious affront. ‘What do you take me for?’

He snapped his fingers and a worried-looking imp appeared out of thin air.

‘Is yes, boss?’ it said.

‘You did, I take it, explain to the, ah, gentleman the purpose of the test sample?’

The imp looked at its feet. ‘Is probably not.’

‘Unfortunate.’ Flatchlock took hold of the imp and twisted its head off. ‘Don’t be so remiss again,’ he said, dropping the body and decapitated head into a handy wastepaper basket with a thump.

Jason shrugged. At some point, when nobody was looking, the imp would reconstitute itself and reappear as though nothing had happened. It was a bit like living in a *Road Runner* cartoon, when you came to think about it.

Flatchlock turned his attention back to Jason.

‘The touching cloth merely sets a brief, resonant connection between universes,’ he explained, ‘as a way of verifying that you are, indeed, fully human and that you come from where you claim.’

‘We’re looking for certain and specific people, you see; people who come from a certain and specific universe, and we might be in the position to offer you a small job. A job...’

He smiled, ‘...that could change the very nature of universal transport forever.’

Travel to the more far-off and out of the way planets involves an arduous and not unentirely chancy game of hopscotch with interstellar liners, subspatial mail-packets, cargo-shipping routes, local planet-hopping transports and complicated methods for bribing privateer-traders so that you end up where you actually want to go as opposed to the block in some far-off and out of the way slave market.

By and large, Benny preferred to travel in that manner, seeing it as an opportunity for any amount of excitement, adventure and diversion as might be found along the way.

The fact that she hardly ever had enough money, power or importance to hire so much as a sub-orbital hover-flitter was quite beside the point.

The Braxiatel Collection, however, had a number of deep-range transport ships, little more than overpowered hyperdrives with bolt-on cockpit pods, which could travel point-to-point across half a galactic spiral arm in a matter of days. Such ships were not like gold dust – they were like hideously expensive custom-built starships in which you couldn’t book the time for love or money in a loveless and increasingly penurious world.

Bernice now owed Irving Braxiatel one of the biggest favours she had ever owed anyone in her life – though the blessing was decidedly mixed. The cabin-space of the probe would have been cramped for a dwarf with a miniature cat.

She had taken her robotic porter Joseph along for company for the two-day trip, but had deactivated the little drone after barely two hours of claustrophobic proximity had her wishing to deactivate it entirely more permanently with a claw-hammer.

That had left her with nothing to fall back on but her own thoughts. Her own memories...

After the dimensional rift had sealed itself, all those years ago, trapping Jason irrevocably behind it, Benny had been plunged into that peculiar misery only reserved for those whose loved ones are Missing, Presumed Dead. It had short-circuited the grieving process, and for a long time she became obsessed with searching for him, for some means of getting back to him, or ultimately getting him back. The fact that when he'd actually *been* there in the first place she'd spent half the time wanting to be shot of him, became literally unthinkable.

All the same, over time, and more or less despite herself, Bernice had gone through the processes of healing: the quiet dropping of his hyphenated surname from hers, the ways in which one thing and another came up so that she simply forgot about him for weeks or months on end. The occasional relationships with other people. The increasing inability to pin down exactly how he had smelt, how it had felt deep inside to touch him, the specifics of his face...

When she had touched the artefact, in the Repository of the Improbable, it had been akin to receiving an electric shock. It had not been so much a rush of sensation, or emotion, as a *blast* of recognition. She had sensed a presence on the other side of the crystal, behind it in some weird dimension the nature of which she could but barely grasp – a living, aware and above all utterly familiar presence. And she had known beyond all doubt just what, and who, it was.

Then it was simply gone, like a comms-signal being perfunctorily cut. In the abstract kind of mental silence that followed, all the feelings she had forgotten, all the pain she'd thought long gone, had burst from their painstakingly constructed and reinforced containment and hit her with the force of a truck.

It had been so sudden, so unutterably devastating, that she couldn't properly feel it, in the same way one doesn't hear the ground-zero bomb blast that has blown out one's eardrums. A detached and clinical part of her mind had noticed, without actually *feeling* much about it either way, that her body was shaking uncontrollably, her lungs and throat wracked with sobs that were simply too big to get

out of her mouth.

That same detached piece of her mind had pointed out, also, that there was most likely a far more simple and prosaic explanation to what she was feeling. She hadn't found some mystic and impossible link to... well, let's face it, she probably hadn't. The sheer coincidence of finding this artefact and touching it at precisely the correct time was just too huge to contemplate. The 'joining stone' of Goron IV had in some abstruse manner merely released and amplified subconsciously buried emotions, or something like that. And disrupting your carefully reconstituted life yet again, going off on yet another wild goose chase on the basis of some sudden flash of sense-memory, would just be stupid.

Just really stupid.

Jason looked out of the porthole for a while, and then decided this was stupid – though not as idiotic, in the end, as the idiot who had thought there should be a porthole here in the first place. The Behemoth-class Mole might be an exciting powerhouse of interlecular transportation, able to chew its way through solid rock at the astonishing rate of a mile a minute, but that didn't change the fact that what you saw from the inside while it was doing so was precisely zippo.

The Behemoth was following the route mapped out by a scout-craft, one of the little two-man (or two-demon, naturally) sonar-equipped exploratory moles that were used to find new bubbles in the eternal rock. There was nothing specifically important about their destination, save that it was currently deserted; the Behemoth contained the first group of colonists who would set foot in this new place, and it had been completely co-opted by Flatchlock and his party.

Jason looked around the passenger cabin at his fellow travellers. There were representatives from almost all the major 'demon' races here: the Azraae, the Shaberabereth, the Yoshoth... years ago, if he had found himself with such an evil-looking collection, Jason might have been very frightened indeed. Now he simply thought of them as people, without thinking much about it either way. That wasn't the source of his unease.

The simple fact was that over a life packed with rather more incident than somewhat, Jason had never, ever found himself with official employment – the sort that on the one hand gives you rights to free medical treatment and a parking space, but on the other comes with so many concomitant rules and regulations that you can find yourself fined or fired for scratching inappropriately or lighting up a fag.

Now he was contract labour – and *contract* was the operable word.

If there was one thing the people of the infernal dimensions knew about it was contracts, and Jason's employment agreement with Flatchlock had run to more or less the size of a telephone book. The signing with blood had been merely a formality for administrative purposes (the infernal dimensions were sufficiently advanced to make use of DNA identification) but Jason had been distressed to find himself lumbered with any number of new responsibilities and commitments, not a one of which he fully understood.

Jason found himself desperately terrified that, after all these years, he was going to blow the one and only chance he'd had to go home.

The flora of Goron IV was jungle-like, but had evolved from a fungoid base that was sufficiently different from Earth-based human biology to prevent any chance of spore-infection. All the same, leaving the grounded probe, Bernice was unpleasantly aware of the muggy, slightly soupy taste of the air in her lungs. She headed through the vegetation, a brittle, fibrous tangle of roots and underbrush crunching under her boots like the stalks of mushrooms.

'Hardly the resort I'd have chosen for a sabbatical,' said Joseph, with a dismissive little electronic sniff. She had activated him again to double-check the planetary co-ordinates she'd stored within him, and now his diminutive silver form floated beside her. 'Still, I suppose you know your own mind best.'

'I'm not on sabbatical,' said Bernice, a little shortly, and trying to remember if Joseph had really sounded this stuffy in the days before he had been broken and repaired. 'This is going to take maybe a few days at the most. Then we're going back.'

'Ah, yes, well,' Joseph said. 'I was rather assuming that this little jaunt might be the sort of thing that's actually an euphemism for *being fired*. I'm surprised, but relieved, to find that it's not.'

'Shh!' Benny hissed. They were coming up on the location of the tribal village where, according to the documentation, the joining stone artefact had been unearthed. Given the moral character of the supplier, 'unearthed' could well have meant grabbing it from some altar and having it away on the feet, leaving a crowd of decidedly angry tribal villagers behind. It was best at this point to proceed with caution.

Cautiously, Bernice moved forward in a crouch, coming to a place where the terrain inclined downward into what she first thought of as a river valley, but was more in fact like a swamp-basin. Clustered here and there were the remains of mound-like shelters, partially collapsed and overgrown with fungus-life that seemed, so far as such things could be judged, to be comparatively recent.

Even newer and in rather better repair were the modular cabins of a

military installation. Slate-grey hov-trucks loaded with combat-uniformed, human troops sent up a spray of spores and sludge as they roamed the compound seemingly at random. On an area of ground paved over with sheets of steel plate, a squad was conducting a small-arms parade. In a big and low-framed stockade off to one side and flush against the side of the swamp-basin – the general layout of the installation obviously designed to guard it in a pincer like, horseshoe fashion – dark shapes moved behind the wire.

‘Those look like Earth Federation personnel,’ Benny said.

‘What would EarthFed forces be doing here?’

‘Well, it hardly looks as though they’re conducting an archaeological dig,’ said Joseph, quietly, by her ear.

There was the sound of boots crunching on fungus behind her. Bernice scrunched herself round and looked up at the body-armoured and cowed figures of two troopers, each of them aiming the discharge coil of a large and nasty-looking pulse-pump rifle directly at her head.

‘Hello there,’ she said brightly, trying to force a friendly smile. ‘I’ve just arrived, and it’s been a long trip. Is it possible I might make use of your facilities?’

The Project needed no other name than that, in the same way that the details of a truck colliding with a townhouse are irrelevant. You don’t need to know it’s carrying five tons of processed cheese or that it’s operated by M.H. Stephens Haulage when it suddenly appears through the wall of your sitting room.

Demon technicians bustled around, setting up various items of arcane-looking cargo-cult equipment. This, however, was purely secondary. The primary point of interest was the steel and timber frame that rose from the rocky floor of this deserted world-bubble, seventy feet high and industriously being hung with folds of cloth. It was the same substance as the Touching Cloth Jason had encountered earlier (and, indeed, now kept in his pocket for use as a handkerchief). It shimmered and gave off its own light, complex forms moving across its surface. The effect was akin to an animated Paisley movie screen.

‘Fabricated by the Weavers of Skund,’ said Flatchlock, whose function now seemed to be that of casting a paternal eye over the activities and explaining expansively. ‘The Touching Cloths were originally mere curios, you know, abstract maps of the Phantasmagorical Regions with little or no practical value. Then we discovered that, in some strange way, they were *linked* to those Regions themselves...’

‘Linked how, precisely?’ asked Jason, who had just about worked out that these ‘Phantasmagorical Regions’ were in fact his own universe.

‘Things would occasionally pass into them,’ said Flatchlock. ‘Or come out from the other side. Well, parts of things, in any event.’ He considered for a moment. ‘Body parts, mostly. Green and orange, for some reason.’

This alarmed Jason slightly more than somewhat. ‘Listen,’ he said. ‘I know you contracted me as a test subject, but you never said anything about me ending up as body parts – green, orange or whatever.’

‘Oh, there’s no chance of that, I can assure you,’ Flatchlock said airily. ‘You see the problem was, we discovered, that the Touching Cloths were too small. The scale of things are rather different on each side, apparently, and any attempt to send, say, a person through was like sending someone through a meat-grinder. Hence...’ Expansively, Flatchlock gestured to take in the screen.

‘So why me as the test subject?’ said Jason. ‘Why a human?’

‘We believe – we hope – that sending someone through into the Realm from which he originally came will open up a conduit,’ said Flatchlock. ‘A stable passageway between these dimensions and the next. Once that is established, we can start sending our own people through, en masse...’

Something was nagging at Jason’s mind. These people weren’t demons as such, and most of them were damned (as it were) fine fellers for all of it – but, well, all right, when you can right down to it they were *demons*. ‘Just what are you planning, Mr Flatchlock,’ he said, ‘when you send all these people through?’

‘Did you actually *read* the what was written on my business card?’ Flatchlock asked him. ‘The Phantasmagorical Realms are going to be the best and most exclusive holiday location of this or any other year-cycle. I’ve already had the brochures printed up.’

‘More tea, Professor Summerfield?’ Dr Grobe proffered the Spode pot and seemed genuinely disappointed when Bernice declined.

He was a lanky, shaven-headed man, with a face set in innate lines of prissy umbrage, like a shaved bulldog or, Benny privately thought, a smacked item of anatomy wholly unsuitable for mention in polite company. In his scientific/surgical smock and prescription monocle, he seemed the epitome, not of a Mad Scientist, but of the sort of clinical and soulless drone who worked the machines in a brainwashing facility.

He seemed strangely out of place in this office which, with its rolltop secretary-desk, high backed chairs, Persian rug, splendid EarthFed flag tacked to the wall and even a potted aspidisterra, had an anachronistic tang of the Old Colonial about it. The Earth Federation – a collection of human-settled planets which, strangely enough, did not include the planet Earth – bore a number of marked similarities with the nineteenth-century British Empire and, consciously or otherwise,

tended to reflect that. Not least by their innate jingoism and a blanket distrust of anyone not of their sort.

Bernice suspected that had she not been human, the perimeter guards would have shot her without a thought. As it was, she had presented her credentials and gone into her spiel about how she was here as a representative of the Braxiatel Collection – who knew precisely where she'd gone and were counting the days until she came back – to observe and document this obviously glorious, farsighted and ground-breaking project, whatever it was, for posterity. She had barely hoped that this namedropping might prevent her from being terminated as a spy, human or otherwise – but was utterly astonished when they had welcomed her presence with open arms, and taken her directly to the man in charge. The project, whatever it was, seemed to be as far from classified as it was possible to get. These people seemed positively proud of it.

Of course, Bernice thought, just because some colonial and imperialistic power is *proud* of what it's doing, that doesn't necessarily make what it's doing in any way nice. Such things have a nasty habit of turning on their tails at a moment's notice. She had taken the opportunity to switch Joseph into a passive record-only mode, on the basis that it might prove useful to have hard evidence of what was going on without actively drawing attention to the recording device.

'Just what kind of doctor are you, Dr Grobe?' Bernice asked him. 'Are you a surgeon? I very much doubt if you're a Doctor of Archaeology or Anthropology. Unless the Federated Planets have a suddenly different way of doing such things that the rest of the galaxy doesn't know about.'

'I'm a Doctor of Physics,' Grobe said, which Benny really should have inferred from the collection of ballpoint pens in the top pocket of his smock. 'With a special interest in thermodynamics processes.'

'And what would someone of that special interest be doing here?'

'Power, Professor Summerfield,' said Dr Grobe. 'As simple as that. Come along and let me show you.'

He took her out of the portable cabin containing his office and into the compound, where a group of creatures were being hauled from the stockade by troops. This was Benny's first real look at the tribal inhabitants of Goron IV: squat little humanoids around three feet tall, their skins a bright orange, each truculent face crowned with a shock of bright-green hair, plaited and woven in a variety of styles that presumably denoted tribal status.

The Goronian natives were taken to a cleared area in which white-coated technicians operated sensor and analysis consoles. The troops roughly arranged them in a circle around a steel-sided box and backed off. There was a kind of desultory, internal squabble amongst the ring

of natives and then one of them dispiritedly climbed to his feet and walked over to the box to raise its lid.

A pulsing glow issued from the box. Instinctively, Bernice clutched at her holdall and the weight of the joining stone within. The light from the box seemed remarkably familiar.

'This is merely a fragment of one of their ritual stones,' Dr Grobe explained from beside her. 'We have yet to, ah, recover one intact, but the effects are quite impressive none the less.'

'So what happened to the intact stones?' Benny asked.

'Well, you know how it is.' Grobe had the decency to look a little shamefaced. 'When the chaps first land on a new colony, things get a little boisterous...'

'Oh,' said Benny.

The natives were now chanting. From this distance Bernice got the impression that the only word they knew was 'boogie-boogie', and sternly told herself not to make assumptions. The chanting rose in pitch and volume; the light from the box pulsed faster and brighter. The lone native who had opened the box ducked his head and put his fingers in his ears.

There was a screaming, tearing sound as though the very world were being torn asunder. Crawling tendrils of electrical discharge burst from the box and struck the lone native, physically lifting him off his feet. With a squeal he was sucked straight into the box like a clump of lint sucked into a vacuum cleaner.

Or at least, most of him was.

The lid of the box slammed shut. For a moment there was complete silence.

'Do you see?' Grobe said excitedly. 'Do you see? These simple aboriginals are able to open up a conduit from this universe to another. Think of the possibilities if we can amplify and harness those energies. Think of the possibilities...'

'I see.' Bernice looked at what was left of the lone native.

'And I'm thinking of the possibilities as we speak.'

In the newly established bubble in the 'demon' realm, the massive screen of Touching Cloth was activated, by way of certain arcane incantations and, more importantly, by plugging it into a generator.

The first test run was what might be called a qualified success. A weak point in the space/time fabric of the Phantasmagorical Regions was located and prised open. A hole in the screen opened up.

Fortunately, the human test subject was not on hand to see what shot out of the hole, having nipped round the back of the Behemoth Mole to answer a call of human nature.

Agraxar Flatchlock pondered the orange and green remains for a

while, and in the end decided to keep any mention of them from the human test subject. It would not, after all, be helpful to worry him unduly.

It was well past nightfall, and the various EarthFed soldiers and scientists had long since had tiffin and gone to bed, almost in their entirety. It might seem strange that what was, after all, a military outpost would operate with relatively few night guards, but this was a part and parcel of EarthFed thinking. Their innate ideas of cultural superiority made the idea that the locals might cause a problem almost literally unthinkable. Bernice crept through the compound, avoiding the minimal guard patrol but secure in the knowledge that she could deal with any chance encounter by way of a suitably well-bred and imperious manner.

The Goronians in the stockade weren't asleep. They were gathered together in muttering clumps, turning and tossing in a manner reminiscent of a small boy's dormitory. Up close they seemed less generally cute and inoffensive than they had earlier. This was mostly due to the smell, which contained something of the pigpen and seemed rather more ingrained than could be explained by mere confinement.

The stockade was in any case big enough to house quite large numbers, even if the facilities amounted to no more than those for livestock. There seemed to be more than a hundred Goronians in here, possibly two.

'Psst!' Benny hissed through the slatted walls. A collection of the nearest Goronians sat bolt upright, cast around in brief confusion and then crowded nearer. They regarded her suspiciously, dim light shining in their piggy little eyes.

'Can you understand me?' Bernice whispered. 'Can you' understand what I'm saying?'

There was a hurried moment of Goronic discussion, and one of them was jostled forward. He seemed indistinguishable from the others, probably chosen as a spokesman more or less at random.

'Boogie boogie,' he said. 'Boogie boogie we-bop.'

'Marvellous,' said Bernice, the word directed at herself since language was obviously going to be a problem after all.

She decided that some more direct form of communication was called for and rummaged in her holdall, brushing aside the still patiently recording Joseph, and pulled out the joining stone. 'You see this? Do you know what this is?'

The Goronians gazed at it in awe, their faces bathed in its phosphorescence. Behind them there was a scrabbling and a ripple of voices as more woke up.

‘Boogie!’ the Goronian spokesman exclaimed in wonder.

‘Boogie, boogie boogie – boogie!’ He began to gesticulate wildly, pointing frantically at the door of the stockade, which was locked by stout bolts well out of Goronic reach.

Bernice considered the options – of which there were a grand total of one. The EarthFed forces quite simply had no right to imprison these people on their own planet. Out of pure humanitarian principles she could do no other than to aid their escape in any way she could.

All of which, when she drew back the bolts securing the stockade, made it all the more hurtful that more than a hundred, and possibly two, Goronian midgets stormed out to engulf her, pull her down and kick her unconscious with their little feet.

Jason stood before the screen, watching the patterns on it swirl. He had started to sweat.

He was sweating because he was now dressed in rubber coveralls, into which he had been inserted with a distressing minimum of talcum powder. Affixed to the coveralls were powerful magical totems and sigils of his own world – or at least, what Flatchlock and his people considered to be powerful magical sigils, items which had found their way into these dimensions over the year-cycles: a girlie playing card with the queen of hearts doing something quite extraordinary, a yellow smiley-faced badge, a beer mat, the triangular label from a segment of processed cheese...

Jason, for his part, was wondering just how the Hell, as it were, he had gotten himself into this. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but – well, no, actually, come to think of it, it had never been a good idea in the first place. Not to put too fine a point upon it, he was well and truly up a certain tributary without an oar and no mistake.

From behind him, the sound of infernal machines rose in pitch.

‘Nearly there,’ the voice of Flatchlock called through it cheerfully. ‘We almost have it open. It’s only a matter of time...’

Automatic prejudice, Professor Bernice Summerfield thought, can sometimes cut both ways. It was one thing not to automatically assume that an indigenous people are a bunch of backward savages who would stick you with a spear and boil you up for lunch as soon as look at you, but it’s another, should you wake up tied to a sacrificial slab or some such, with someone advancing on you with a sacrificial knife, not to realise that you are, in all possibly, in very deep trouble indeed.

She came to this conclusion shortly after waking up to find herself tied, at wrists and ankles, to a kind of fungoid cross, and staring directly at the joining stone, which was resting on a rocky plinth. Carved into the rock, with marked but rather distressing realism, were

pictures of little Goronians being torn apart by multiple-tentacled monsters. The joining stone now glowed and pulsed brightly.

Bernice craned her neck to look around her. A fungus-jungle clearing rather smaller than the swamp basin occupied by the EarthFed forces and arranged like an amphitheatre. Its stepped sides were packed with Goronians, all of them chanting away with an obviously religious fervour, and each of them no doubt privately pleased that they'd found someone *else* as a sacrificial victim for a change.

'Boogie boogie,' they were chanting. 'Boogie, boogie-boogie boogie boo!'

The language was probably far more subtle, ultimately, Benny decided, than it might appear to her untutored ear, packed with subtleties and hidden beauty in the intonation and rhythms in much the same way as is Cantonese. On the other hand, in the present circumstances, she quite frankly couldn't bring herself to give a tuppenny.

'Boogie boogie boogie,' the Goronians chanted. 'Boogie be-boogie boogie boogie boogie!'

Bernice became aware of something cold and hard nudging insistently at her leg. She looked down to see Joseph. He had probably been reactivated from his passive mode during the struggle in which the Goronians had captured her.

'If you don't mind me saying so,' he said, 'I think this might be a time to extricate oneself from one's predicament.'

'You don't', said Bernice, 'say. I don't suppose there's anything you can do? Like flinging yourself heroically at this trellis and smashing it to bits? Or braining a Goronian High Priest?' She cast around trying to locate someone of any relative importance in the orange-and-green crowd, but the eye untrained for the distinctions made them as physically as much of a mass as the ear untrained did their words.

'Sadly, no.' Joseph sighed. 'I very much fear that my impeller field is too weak to do any great amount of damage.'

'Well, thanks for trying as much as you have,' Benny said acidly.

'Don't mention it,' Joseph said. It was one of those moments where Bernice was genuinely unsure as to whether the little drone was being sarcastic, or whether he really and honestly did think he'd been the slightest bit of help at all.

Such thoughts were dashed aside when, as had happened in the EarthFed compound under more controlled circumstances, the chanting of the Goronians rose in pitch.

The joining stone before her flared, bright enough to blind her instantly – temporarily, she could only hope. In the pain and overwhelming chaos of misfiring optic nerves, she heard the tearing of

the world before her, felt the burning lash of some electrical discharge, felt the massive wrenching in the pit of her stomach as she suddenly hurtled forward...

And it is at this point, sadly, that our chroniclers find themselves at something of a loss. How, after all, does one describe the indescribable? Functions and processes of which the human mind is incapable of even imagining, let alone the senses feeling. Indeed, the nearest we can come to some coherent explanation of the events that followed is to rely on the words of Dr Rupert Gilhooly, the famous astrophysicist, who put it more or less thus:

‘So look, right, you’ve got these two people shooting down this interdimensional thingie, both of them probably terrified, and it’s serious trouser-ruining time, but, like, they can’t do that because they’re in this sort of abstract state, you follow me...?’

‘It’s like a couple of trains going into a tunnel from either end – only it’s not, not really, ’cause if they were trains they’d have drivers who could stop them. Forget about the trains.

The thing is, obviously, at some point they’re going to collide.

‘Now the *important* thing (and this is going to be a bit complicated) is that they both originally came from the same universe. Same quantum-packet signatures and stuff, you know what I mean? Now, yeah, right, if they were in a solid state they’d just be two people hitting each other with enormous force – splat city, right? But because they’re in an abstract state they, like, *rebound*. They knock each other back the way they came. Something like that, anyway. Have you seen those little cat’s cradle things you get on desks with the silver balls? Right. Like that...

‘Plus also, I reckon, in the moment of impact they might merge a little. You know the sort of stuff, bits of memory and identity and stuff sheering off and attaching themselves to the other. A sort of *melding* thing, you know? My guess is, it would be sort of like sex but sort of really, really mind-blowing. But I wouldn’t know anything about mind-blowing sex. I’m a famous astrophysicist.’

Irving Braxiatel looked the bruised and battered Bernice up and down. They were in the study of his apartments at the Collection, to which they had repaired after he had ascertained that she needed no medical treatment as such.

The return trip was uneventful?’ he said.

‘Just tiring.’ Benny yawned hugely in one of Braxiatel’s big leather chairs, and took another swallow of a decidedly non-medicinal port and brandy from his private stock. ‘There really isn’t much else to say. The EarthFed forces found me in the clearing, together with the fried remains of several Goronians. The rest appeared to have simply run

away. Their best guess is that, when I entered this interdimensional conduit, I encountered something travelling precisely in the opposite direction and we sort of cancelled each other out, flinging me back. It was pure dumb coincidence, I suppose – but that seems to have been the defining point of this whole debacle, pure dumb coincidence.’ She became thoughtful.

‘Or maybe time works differently between the universes – not just running at different speeds, but with events waiting to be accessed from the other end, like files waiting on a Galactic Net server to be downloaded...’ Her head lolled a little before she caught herself with a start and finished off her port and brandy. ‘Sorry. I’m rambling. I’m dead on my...’

‘Quite,’ said Braxiatel, before she could say the completely innocent word *feet*, which was what she’d been about to say even though she was technically sitting down. ‘And what of the “joining stone” that caused this whole fuss in the first place?’

‘Shattered,’ said Bernice. ‘At least, I saw any number of shards stuck into the side of the amphitheatre. The EarthFed people weren’t too happy about that. Dr Grobe wanted to have me shot, I think, but I got all imperious and told them how I wasn’t happy with them letting me be captured by their so-called prisoners and being subjected to various primitive rituals... In the end they had to give me the benefit of the doubt. The last I saw before they left, they were packing up the entire garrison and making to leave for New Terra.’

‘Well, things could have been worse,’ said Braxiatel, ‘and that’s the important thing. The Federated Earth Planets are the last sort of people I’d trust, personally, with access to a whole new dimension. I fear they’d make the most dreadful hash of it.’ His face fell a little, however, as he considered things. ‘Still, all in all, it was a bit of a missed opportunity.’

Heading back to her Collection living quarters and bed, Bernice was in complete agreement. She had been guarded about mentioning her interdimensional encounter with Jason, not because of any concern for privacy, but because she simply didn’t know what to think of it. The pain of it was too fresh, too raw, and she was still in some sense probing the ragged edges of it.

A line kept going through her head, thrown up by the memory from an ancient song: ‘...and a taste of honey’s worse than none at all. WOOO-OO-OO-OOOH!’

Strangely enough, though, she found there was a kind of positive edge to her thoughts. After years of futile searching, she had finally found him, if only for the briefest moment – and that moment had left the both of them changed on some deep and fundamental level. There was a small part inside her, now, that would forever be Jason. And the

fact that it was currently forming the words 'not that small' in her head made her smile despite herself.

And if you can do something once, you can do it again, once you get the knack of it. For so long he had been completely sealed from her, on some emotional level that had left her unable to imagine any reality in which they might be together – but that had now changed. It might take months, or years, and she had no idea what would happen, but now she was sure that in some way she'd be seeing Jason again.

She was certain of it.

The atmosphere on the Behemoth Mole was subdued. The conversations, such as they were, were desultory. It was the atmosphere of a collection of driven people, who have sunk all the energy they possessed into some glorious enterprise, only to find that they've driven themselves into a brick wall.

In a figurative sense, obviously.

Jason's misery was twofold. So close. After all these years, to come so close. To finally touch what, he now realised, he had been yearning for in all this time – only to be torn away in bare seconds. Cups, lips to be dashed away from, issue for the use of, and no mistake.

And plus, he couldn't help noticing how all those involved with the Project were blaming him. He had been a simple test subject in an experiment which had failed. It wasn't his fault that the universal processes which had flung him back had sealed the dimensional rift completely. Everyone knew that, but all the same, he didn't think he could stand much more of very carefully not being blamed.

He wandered up the cabin aisle, past assorted dispirited horrors, until he came to Flatchlock, sitting there a broken man-equivalent and idly petting his imp.

'Listen...' Jason said. 'I'm sorry things worked out like this. If you don't want to pay me then I'll...'

'Please don't trouble yourself,' said Flatchlock. 'It was a simple miscalculation on our part. A contract is a contract, after all, and you'll get every soul we owe. You'll be paid in full.'

Privately, Jason was relieved. 'I just wish things had worked out better,' he repeated aloud.

Flatchlock nodded heavily. 'And interdimensional excursions would have only been the head of the tunnel.'

Think of the possibilities – cargo routes, the opening up of Embassies, cultural exchange, and we'd have been right at the heart of things...' He sighed, then brightened a little despite himself. 'Ah, well. I suppose we'll just have to go back to using Station Control, like we always do.'

There was a moment's silence.

'What?' said Jason.

So now you know. The galaxy knows. Hopefully the other dimension that my old man currently resides in also knows. He may very well be on his way home.

I am, of course; horrified.

I am, of course, delighted.

I do hope he gets to read both versions of the above.

It just goes to show, a husband's for life, not just for Christmas.

It's now the next day. If you see what I mean. Long bounty hunter groans are coming from my bathroom, and having been able to demonstrate that I've done lots of work overnight, and I'm faintly astonished that Mr Scozz understands a word count symbol, Mr Plurk is making breakfast for me. Thankfully, this involves only ingredients from my own kitchen, so I may very well find myself able to eat it.

Mr Plurk may have developed a little crush on me, actually.

He's been talking in the most eloquent fashion about his business, the little sayings they have, the slang of the job, how to pickle a head, etc. Well, I listened, with my chin on my hand, because it gave me a chance to rest my fingers for a few minutes, and he seemed pleased. I await breakfast with interest, and my best flirtatious eyebrow. Which isn't up to much at the moment, actually, considering I've been up all night and my face is drooping down to my knees.

Maybe he likes that.

Not that I want to actually flirt with him, you understand. It's just that it's always good to be on the right side of someone who's better armed than any army on whose assistance one might reasonably be able to call.

We come to a story I'm very fortunate to have got my hands on. I'm usually very bad with celebrities. I tend towards being offensively chummy in a way that, initially, makes them feel like they're still one of the people, but, eventually, reminds them of why they worked so hard to put so much distance between them and the people in the first place.

But there are certain celebrities in whose stories I'm intimately involved.

9: The Least Important Man

By Steven Moffat

The room is dark. Or my eyes are shut. One or the other.

Someone is pushing a concrete block along a stone floor. I can hear each long, grinding scrape, each pause for rest.

There is a cool breeze down my left side. I can hear city noise, soft and distant; car horns bleating in the canyons below my window. For some reason I decide I'm above Oxford Street. Far above. Or maybe I'm just imagining it. It's hard to tell and I find it hard to care.

Scrape. Rest. The guy keeps pushing. Sounds like difficult work.

I feel as though this room is white and high in the sky. If I could see the window it would a square of perfect blue in a mint-white wall and everything difficult would just be a murmur far away. Like distant traffic heard from a hammock.

I don't open my eyes because I don't want to be wrong.

Scrape. Rest. He doesn't give up, that guy. I imagine him leaning against the block between pushes. Breathing hard, all glossy with sweat. Someone should give him a hand.

I'm not alone here. Someone is sitting right next to me.

I'm sure it's a woman but I don't know why. Perfume?

Scrape. Grind. Rest. That was a tough one.

I can't smell perfume. But I can smell the room. I'm in a hospital. Why? Am I visiting someone? Did somebody I know get hurt?

The voice, when it comes, sounds odd. As if you're not supposed to talk here. Why not? Is somebody dying?

'Can you hear me?'

I was right. A woman.

Rustle of clothes. Creak of a chain Warm breath.

'Don't try to move.' I tried to move?? That was ambitious!

'If you can hear me just make any kind of signal you can manage. Okay?'

Quite suddenly, I remember. Lots of things. Bad things.

Worst thing of all, I remember what I have to say now – what I have to ask this woman to do. Almost as bad: I realise that there isn't any concrete block scraping along the floor and there's no guy to push it.

There's just me. Breathing.

Okay. Going to talk now. It's not going to be easy. Things are going to rattle and shudder in my chest in ways I won't like. But, hey, let's take it one word at a time! Three little words ought to do it. I can hack three little words.

Big breath. Big push. Concrete block right to the top of the hill...

'Put!' I say.

I remember the fall. I remember hitting the mud and the mud sucking round me. Burning through my clothes.

Burning? How can mud burn?

Okay. Second word. Here goes! All together now, let's shove!!

'Me!'

I remember the mud swallowing the sky. Knowing that I would never see the sky again. Never see anything again. I remember the mud pushing at my eyes, stuffing my mouth, filling my throat. Crushed in the darkness, knowing that this was all that was left of my life; knowing that the pain and the terror and the terrible screaming silence would go on for ever. And then – the hands reaching through the mud, lifting me impossibly clear. Air again – sudden, wonderful air, full of light and sounds.

One more word. I can do it. It's important. Shoulder to the block...

'Back!'

My name is Gavin Oliver Scott. I was born in Nottingham.

My favourite programme is *Blake's 7* and I have all the episodes on tape. I'm a university student and I live in a reasonably shabby student flat with two friends, a lot of damp in the kitchen, and a Labrador called Servalan.

I am the least important man. Ever.

For us, of course, the twentieth century is defined by Gavin Oliver Scott. It is, from the perspective of the twenty-sixth century, his era. His time. As we review his life we must try to remember that he had not the least idea of his significance, nor the least notion that every last detail of his day to day existence would, six hundred years later, be studied in places such as this. He could not, in any way have known, that for his descendants he would be the twentieth century...

I don't remember anything about being a baby, except this.

I woke up one night and there was a woman standing over me. Her face was big and close and her lips were moving although I couldn't hear her speak. I wasn't scared because she seemed nice and if I was smiling by then I'm sure I smiled at her. I went back to sleep and dreamed her face many times. Or maybe I saw her again. It's difficult to know.

As is now generally accepted, Gavin was born at six pounds, two days early, by Caesarean section. For some years it was thought he was in fact ten days late, but the exhaustive work of the Scott

institute in this area has finally disproved this theory. Gavin was a healthy baby, and normal in all respects.

The next time I saw her (for sure) she stood in the corner of the living room and watched me building towers out of coloured blocks. I smiled again but she didn't smile back. She just stood there, moving her lips, and making no sound. I thought that was funny and I laughed. I crawled across the room to fetch my best toy and show it to her, but when I turned she was gone.

The third time, I was playing at Toby Wilton's house. He had the biggest house and the biggest garden ever. We were playing with his biggest ever Scalextrix in his bedroom (biggest ever) when I looked out of the window. There she was, the woman from the nursery. She was standing in the back garden, talking and gesturing, but alone. And then, quite suddenly, she looked straight up at me, and pointed.

I startled back from the window.

'Who's she?' I asked.

Toby was trying to arrange a particularly massive car crash and was annoyed that his dead bodies were out of scale for the cars. 'Won't let go of their guns,' he sulked, knocking a little plastic soldier on to his back. 'S'not realistic. You wouldn't keep holding your gun if you was smashed up.'

'Who's the woman in the garden?' I persisted.

'Gardener,' said Toby, not looking up.

'Why've you got a gardener?'

'Because it's cheaper in The Long Run,' said Toby, importantly, the way he did when he was repeating something his father had told him.

'Oh,' I said.

I looked back out of the window – the Woman was gone now – and tried to imagine what a Long Run was. I pictured a long corridor of green lawn with the Woman at the far end, all strange and distant, waving at me. Behind me Toby was making funny glugging noises. I watched him for a bit, amazed. 'Are you allowed to put ketchup on the carpet?' I asked.

'S'realistic,' explained Toby.

But she wasn't Toby's gardener – not even in the Long Run.

She was a teacher. I found that out on my first day at school.

The main teacher, Mrs Grillo, was a big grey woman with yellow teeth, a minty smell and a funny noise when she breathed. I was scared of her because her skin was all creased and shiny, like my Mum's handbag, and sometimes she got cross and shouted at me and I thought only my Mum and Dad were allowed to do that.

The other teacher, standing shadowed in the corner, was the Long

Run woman. She didn't shout. She didn't even speak. She just stood there on the morning of my first day, moving her lips and making no sound. No one else seemed to pay any attention to her so I didn't either. Until I needed to go to the toilet.

Education, in this era, began at five years of age – at least in the UK. What we're seeing here is a fairly typical school and a fairly typical first day. Gavin's attention seems strangely unfocused, and while some sources attribute this to the attention deficit disorder first postulated by Professor Milligan and later disputed by Kent-Green, most Gavin experts now believe that his behaviour stemmed from disposition rather than pathology. He was, if you like, habitually dreamy' rather than compulsively so.

Of most interest here is that this is the first recorded reference to Gavin's imaginary friend, whose regular appearances throughout Gavin's life have vexed scholars now for close on twenty years.

Mrs Grillo's face was very close and I wanted to cry.

'Now, Gavin, what did I tell you to do if you wanted to go to the toilet?'

I gave a really big sniff. 'Ask,' I said and my voice came up all shuddery from my chest.

'Ask, yes, Gavin. And did you ask, Gavin?'

'Yes!' And my eyes stung because it was so unfair.

'No, Gavin, you did not ask. I would know if you'd asked, wouldn't I?'

'I *did* ask! I *did*!'

Mrs Grillo gave a big sigh that made all the hairs in her nose quiver like insect legs. I imagined lots of insects trapped inside her nose wiggling their legs, trying to get out. 'No, Gavin, you did not!'

'I asked the other teacher!'

Mrs Grillo frowned.

I'd asked the Long Run woman if I could go to the toilet and she hadn't said I couldn't – she hadn't really said anything – so off I'd gone. And got lost. They'd found me one floor up, sitting on the floor, bawling. And now I was in trouble on my first day and Mrs Grillo would probably tell my Mum and Dad.

'Gavin, there is no other teacher!' said Mrs Grillo.

'Gavin – do you have an imaginary friend?'

'What's 'maginary?'

Mrs Grillo had told my parents about the 'other teacher' and now my mother was having a 'little chat' with me.

'An imaginary friend is someone who's just made up. Someone

who's your friend but only you can see.'

'Like Toby?'

'Toby's real, Gavin. Other people can see him.'

'If he was 'maginary could people not see him?'

'That's right. That's exactly right.'

'Can I be 'maginary?'

Big sigh. I took it as a no.

'The teacher you saw today. The other teacher. She was imaginary, wasn't she?'

I thought about this. Mrs Grillo couldn't see her. Maybe the woman from the Long Run did have the special power of the 'maginary. 'Yes,' I said.

Mum smiled. Right answer.

'Well the important thing is,' she said, 'You mustn't do what imaginary friends tell you. Okay?'

'Okay,' I said. Right answer again. Right answers are what make your mother smile.

There have been many theories about Gavin's imaginary friend, from the Kelly and Forsyth hypotheses that Gavin was in fact actually haunted, to the controversial theories of Dr Lane that Gavin simply invented the whole thing, following the toilet incident.

Perhaps today – with the quantum imager – we'll be able to establish the truth. Gavin's imaginary friend makes several appearances throughout his growth to adulthood. We will examine each one, briefly...

She turned up, every now and then, but after my mother's warning I was always careful to ignore her. She watched me on the sports field when I won the egg and spoon race. She stood by me when I won the English prize. I saw her over Rosemary Pope's shoulder just after my first kiss and she was at the funeral when my grandmother died. And somehow I just got used to it. There was an imaginary woman who turned up and mouthed at me every now and then. So?

Probably everyone had one of those. She'd been with me all my life, she was part of the landscape and I just stopped wondering about her, the way you stop worrying about why the sky's blue and how tides work. You can, after all, get used to anything.

Once, when I was about twelve, I was reading out an essay in front of the class called 'Where I Would Like to Live'. I chose – naturally – The Future.

Toby Wilton's hand shot up. 'Miss! Miss! Everybody is going to live in the future. Because the future starts right away, like tomorrow, or something. It's not in a hundred years. So that's wrong for a start, isn't

it, Miss?’

I glowered at Toby. I didn’t mean *tomorrow* kind of future.

I meant Spaceland, with silver suits and conveyor belt pavements. I hated Toby anyway – two days ago I’d heard him complain to his mother that ‘it won’t be a proper birthday party if *Gavin’s* invited!’

‘That’s right, Gavin,’ said the teacher. ‘Are you saying you want to live in tomorrow?’ The teacher liked to make fun of me because she was small and squeaky and making jokes about me made her popular with the rest of the class.

I felt my face roaring like a furnace and everyone was laughing. And I just had to stand-there, and stand, and stand, and stand.

And there she was. The one face not laughing – the Long Run woman standing calmly at the back of the class. Her lips were moving soundlessly as usual, but this time I knew what she was saying. She was telling me she understood about The Future and how it wasn’t stupid to want to live there, and that maybe one day I would. So I stood my ground, blasted by all that terrible laughter, my stinging eyes fixed on her face, and knew I’d love her for ever.

That night I dreamed about the woman standing at the end of the long green run, calling to me, summoning me to the magical, silver place called The Future – to Spaceland.

The next day Toby invited me to his birthday party anyway, so he went back to being my best friend and I could go back to ignoring my imaginary one.

I ignored her quite happily for many years, until two things happened that changed everything; a lecture and a woman.

‘The biographer,’ quivered Mr Frisby, nervous as a spider in the gloom behind the lectern, never daring to lift his eyes from his lecture notes to the rows of students slouched in slowly cooking boredom beneath the blazing windows, ‘is both a fair and foul weather friend. But he is nothing in between.’

She was two rows away, wearing a summer dress that was so skimpy it was practically a trick of the light. I’d walked past her on the way in and the curve of her neck had punched a hole in me. I’d noticed she had lips. I don’t know what other people had, but *she* had lips. The name on her notebook was Irene Gilbey.

‘The biographer attends his subject – one might almost say victim...’ She shifted slightly in her seat and the whole universe boomed and shivered like a beaten gong ‘...only at those pivotal moments in his or her life which are of significance to the future commentator.’

Irene didn’t take notes. She just sat staring. I had a sudden lurching certainty that she *loved* Mr Frisby. I looked at her, appalled, and the world temperature dropped a degree. It was true. It was incontestably true. Every student in the room had a pen racing across their pad,

faithfully transcribing every droning word like good little first-years – the guy next to me even included ‘Could you open that window a bit, please?’ – but her notebook remained closed.

She just stared and stared at Frisby, avid on his every syllable, and I stared at her, my chest clanging with every flick of her hair. How could she love *him*?? *Frisby*?? This pale, nervous little man, poking out of his ill-fitting black suit like a tortoise from its shell?? *How*??

‘Great men and women of history only find the ghost image of their future biographers hovering at their elbow in moments of great pivotal significance,’ continued Frisby, like anyone still cared now that the world had gone dark and happiness was just a memory. Somewhere at the back of my mind, one lone synapse – the only one not doing a Mexican wave about some recent shifts in Irene’s hem-line – recorded this piece of Frisby’s lecture, noted that it might be of importance.

Probably they were having an affair. Irene and Frisby. An affair! Sex and everything! Probably she’d have sex with him right after this lecture. My entire body clenched and I fell screaming into a terrible hole that had just opened up in my stomach.

It was a certainty! The moment this lecture was finished, that golden creature in her floating dress, bursting with summer and sex, would trip up the stairs to Frisby’s clammy little office, giggling with anticipation, and... and they’d...

My mind screamed ‘Noooooooo!!!’ so loudly the guy next to me wrote it down.

I resolved to shun all human society and live a cellar with just rats and dripping water.

‘She’s deaf, you huge galactic git,’ said Toby, who was going to be a dentist. He’d told me on the first day that later he’d get to pull teeth out of dead people.

‘Why couldn’t you just use models?’ I’d asked.

‘Not realistic,’ he’d said, scornfully.

‘What difference does that make?’ I said, picking apart my bread roll. ‘She loves Frisby. You should’ve seen the way she was looking at him.’

‘She’s deaf!’ repeated Toby, in mounting exasperation. ‘I met her on the first day. Excellent tits. Crap ears.’

‘I still don’t see what –’

‘She was *lip-reading*, rabbit-brain. That’s why she was staring at him. Get it now?’

‘Lip-reading?’ The thought chugged through my brain. It was taking a while but I felt like it was going somewhere important.

‘She wasn’t staring at the guy. She was trying to figure out what he was saying. You there now? Have you got it?’

‘You mean... you mean she’s not in love with Frisby?’

‘I don’t know who she’s in love with. I just know she’s got to stare at people if she wants to know what they’re saying.’

‘So I’ve got a chance then?’

I looked across the refectory to where Irene had been sitting with her friends. She was on her feet now, saying good-bye. She was standing with one hip cocked in a way that caused my lungs to completely forget what they were supposed to be doing.

‘Deaf, I said. Not blind.’

‘She’s not in love with Frisby. I could have a shot!’

‘You don’t have a shot. You’ll never have a shot. It’s not conceptually possible for you to have a shot.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying she’s gorgeous and you think *Blake’s 7* is a good programme. Face it,’ he said, with the important face he’d learned from his father. ‘It’s just not realistic.’

She was heading away to the short flight of steps that led down to the doors that led out to the sunshine. I watched her hips and suddenly a big wave hit the side of the ship and the whole floor started slanting like mad – except we were in a university refectory on dry land, but let’s not get hung up on details.

I started after her. I wasn’t even sure what I wanted. Maybe I wanted to watch her walk a bit more. Maybe I even wanted to speak to her. Maybe I just wanted to help her to a lifeboat.

I don’t know.

But I do know this. There were seven steps leading from the upper refectory to the double-doors that led out to the campus – and by time I’d gone down them I understood every single thing about my life. That’s all it took. Seven steps. Like this.

As I hit the top step she was just starting to open the door.

I was wondering what was going to happen. I was doing something dumb and unplanned and it was like leaping off into the void. Either something interesting was going to happen or I was just going to hit the ground with a big squelch.

Second step: so I did what I always did when I was wondering what was about to happen – I looked around for *her*. I looked around for the Long Run woman. Because if something big was about to happen she’d always be there. I didn’t *know* I knew that – I’d never even thought about it. It was just there, a great solid certainty I’d never even bothered to question.

Third step: and there she was, watching. She was standing just by the doors, mouthing away – Irene was walking right past her. Yes!!! Result!!! Something big was on the way.

Fourth step: Mr Frisby’s quivering voice: ‘Great men and women of

history only find the ghost image of their future biographers hovering at their elbow in moments of great pivotal significance.'

Fifth step: did I have a biographer? Was the future watching me? Ridiculous!

Fourth step: but if it was true...

Fifth step: ... maybe one day...

Sixth step: ... I was going to matter! Some day, somehow, I was going to do something that *actually counted* for something.

Seventh step: Toby Wilton was a complete arse.

I raced after Irene, for the first time in my life, thinking that I actually mattered. That anything was possible.

I ran round in front of her – because you can't call out to a deaf girl, right? – and just blurted out, 'Hi!'

She came to a halt, looked at me, puzzled. Not alarmed, though. Even a nervous half smile. This close I noticed her eyes were a complete different shade of perfect and that her breasts moved slightly when she breathed – which is probably fairly normal but I'd never see it done this well.

Okay. This was it. Pivotal moment coming up. Get it right, Gavin! Remember she's lip-reading so talk clearly. Remember she's deaf so don't do anything stupid or patronising.

Remember the Long Run woman is watching so this is a big, important moment. For God's sake don't blow it...!

She's waiting for me to speak. Okay, here I go! Goodbye launch pad...

'What sort of music do you like?' I asked, tremulously.

Hello, ground.

That wasn't the stupidest thing I said. The stupidest thing came next. Once she'd finished giving me a raised eyebrow so ironic people felt inferior three streets away, and my face had inflated to twice its normal size in pillar-box red, I managed to say something so stupid I threatened the fabric of the entire universe and the future of all life-kind.

The next three years of Gavin's life – the last three – are the biggest mystery of all, and here the Quantum Imager, even with the extraordinary Blinovitch refinements we're using for the first time today, finally fails us.

Even three years later, sitting alone in my tatty little student flat and about to see the Long Run woman for the first time in ages and the last time ever, I couldn't stop thinking about the stupid thing I said. It had caused me more personal embarrassment than anything else ever. More work too!

And suddenly, there she was, in the corner...

What we're seeing here is the last evening of Gavin's life. He seems subdued and quiet, but not more so than we would expect at this period of his life. As you can see, he is slumped in the living room of his apartment, staring vacantly. We know that he spends a great deal of time with his close friend Irene Gilbey but that this has not blossomed into romance – they seem to be studying something together but it has never been established what. We can be reasonably certain that he loved Irene and never lost hope that they might be together – but none of the information that might have pushed him over the edge was in his possession at this time. He did not know that for the first two years of their friendship she was conducting an affair with the lecturer Harlan Frisby – apparently this was known to everyone on the campus except Gavin – or that she had recently begun an affair with Toby Wilton, Gavin's best friend, whom she would later marry.

Dumb thing to say! Galactically dumb! But who knew she would take me seriously??

It's odd too, that Gavin should suddenly abandon his belief – somehow connected with his imaginary friend – that he would one day find great success and fame. Our own Professor Heggarty has suggested – not entirely seriously – that Gavin had some kind of premonition of what his future fame would rest on, and that that was what pushed him over the edge. Certainly, if Gavin had known that he was destined to die at twenty-one and find fame only as the only perfectly-preserved corpse of a twentieth-century man available to us in the twenty-sixth, he might well have found the idea a little dispiriting. Fame as a fossil was certainly not what he had in mind.

... interestingly, he now looks more depressed, doesn't he? There's no obvious reason but suddenly his mood has... altered...

Anyway.

As is widely known he jumped from a city bridge, missed the river, and sank into a mud bank, which would not have been the most comfortable of deaths...

...you know, he almost seems to be looking at us, doesn't he? Well – looking at me.

It was the particular composition of this mud – Professor Heggarty suspects it was of extra-terrestrial origin – that preserved his body so...

Look, am I mad? Is he staring at me?? Almost as if he could... understand what I'm... saying.

Oh Goddess! Oh dear Goddess!!

Could somebody fetch Braxiatel? And – you know – fairly quickly?

'You know,' I'd said, moronic in the face of beauty, flailing for something – anything – to say, 'I've always wanted to learn to lip-read.'

Dostoyevski.

Okay, I'm drifting a bit from the point here, but I gave up my life to save your whole rotten universe – I gave up my place in The Future for you – so give me a little space to get literary, okay?

Dostoyevski – that Russian who wasn't Tolstoy – he wrote something like this:

If you could design the perfect future for everybody, with peace and love and central heating and everything, and all you had to do to bring it about was torture to death one tiny, innocent creature, would you consent to be the architect under those conditions?

Peanuts, Mr D. That's not a moral dilemma. This is a moral dilemma.

Would you consent to be the tiny, innocent creature?

The Long Run woman's name was Bernice Summerfield. She did a lot of shouting and I guessed she was clearing whatever kind of lecture theatre they have in the future.

Then we were talking, my imaginary friend and I.

It was a stilted conversation even by the standards of a *Blake's 7* fan and a woman. We sat solemnly either side of the tunnel she'd somehow burrowed through the years. I lip-read and, six centuries later, she read from bits of card I held up for her. And my own personal ghost grew whiter and more haunted.

How can you see me? I asked.

'Quantum Imager,' she replied. 'Allows you to model past events if you have some kind physical link to the events in question.'

In this case, my body?

She was a very white ghost now. 'Yes,' she said.

How can I see you?

‘New technology. It’s not supposed to happen.’

(Somebody I couldn’t see prompted her and she listened for a moment, frowning.) ‘It is theoretically possible for a Quantum Imager to affect the past to a very limited degree, but it normally requires the interaction of a living mind.’

And my mind is due to stop living some time tonight?

It’s hard to assess volume when you’re lip-reading but I think she said ‘yes’ very quietly indeed.

What if I don’t? I wrote.

Try this for a mood killer. If I didn’t die tonight the universe would end. A time paradox would begin at the place of moment of my birth – I couldn’t avoid my death unless I was warned of it and I couldn’t be warned of it unless I died, etc.

– and the whole space/time continuum would simply unravel. Starting from Nottingham. I quite liked that bit.

Starting from Nottingham and including Irene. Didn’t like that bit so much.

So there I sat, on the last night of my life, with a woman from Spaceland, who in six hundred years would give a lecture on my imaginary friend only to discover it was her, and I learned that all The Future wanted from me was my definite non-attendance. Gripping my chair, the old familiar stinging in my eyes, I was a little boy again who’d gone to the toilets and never found the way back. I was the last boy chosen for the football team. I was the friend your mother forced you to invite to your birthday party. I felt as if I was falling; as if I’d been falling all my life. Now all I had to do was find a bridge and continue the motion.

Goodbye launch-pad.

Hello mud.

There wasn’t a lot of time between the bridge and the mudbank, but I had to pass it somehow. I thought about Irene, and all those nights alone with her, so close her smile could heat me, stupid with her perfume, staring at her lips and trying to read their secrets.

I thought about Toby, who always had the best of everything, and now Irene too. I imagined him saying: ‘It won’t be a proper future if Toby’s invited.’

I thought about Bernice. I’d known her all my life; she’d known me for a two-hour lecture. Which says everything you need to know about my relationship with women.

And at the last I thought this – and I liked it.

‘Well what do you know!’ I thought, as the mud sucked me out of the world and into all those textbooks six hundred years in the future. ‘Finally the losing side writes history.’

Scrape. Rest.

Maybe it's not me breathing. Maybe it's the universe unravelling. I've told her my story, one long, lung-rattled word at a time, but she's been silent. Maybe she doesn't believe me. Maybe this stupid woman isn't going to do what I need her to, and the whole cosmos is going to go under with a big Nottingham-shaped hole in the side.

'Listen, to me,' says the woman, eventually. 'I know you're confused. But you've got to understand something; you survived in that mud for six days!'

I'm surprising myself with how angry I am. So what, I survived six days?? Why is this woman still talking? I've got me a universe to save!!

'Six days!! Do you understand what I'm saying? God knows what that stuff is – or where it came from; our boffins are calling it stasis-gel – but it kept you alive, preserved you.'

I can feel every bit of my brain jumping up and down.

Stupid woman! Stupid bloody woman!! I'm into it now. I've discovered my place in the scheme of things and I don't want it taken away from me. I may be the least important man – but, damn it, I'm going to be the most important fossil!! It's not exactly *Blake's 7* but it'll get my name known – and when your name is Gavin that's not as easy as you'd think.

I gather my strength for one more try. I hardly notice that in the panic-stations control room of my brain, one lone synapse is trying to get my attention. Probably that boring git who actually listened to that Irene-shagging-bastard-Frisby's lecture. 'Um – there's something you missed there actually,' says the synapse. I ignore it.

'Put!' I begin, with all the venom I can muster.

'There's no reason for us to put you back,' says the woman, patiently. 'What I'm saying is, we can have you back to normal health in no time. Medicine has advanced a lot while you've been in the mud.'

Yeah, right! It's advanced a lot in six days. Of course it has!

'Me!' I continue.

'Um,' intrudes the synapse, nervously. 'She didn't, in fact, say "six days". You just assumed she said "six days" because that made more sense to you.'

'Sorry, it's taken us so long to get started reviving you,' the woman is saying. 'Quite honestly, we didn't realise you were alive until we hooked you up to the Quantum Imager.'

'In fact,' continues the synapse. 'She said "six centuries".'

'Ba–' I start to say.

Wha–?' I think.

'You were on display in a cryo-tank for fifty years,' continues the woman, apologetically. 'The museum staff want to apologise in

person, by the way. They've sent flowers.'

It takes me a long time to think about it but finally I summon the courage. I open my eyes.

A woman I know very well is smiling at me and it's a very nice smile and... and...

Bloody hell!

Bloody, bloody hell!!

Spaceland!!!

Bernice told me later that I just passed out at that point and stayed out for about a week – which you might think is odd behaviour for someone who'd already been kipping inside a mud bank for over half a millennium. She said I smiled as I slept and asked me what I dreamed about.

I wanted to say I dreamed about the long-dead Irene or the long-gone world from which I'd come. But I'm pretty sure I didn't. I'm pretty sure there was one thought going round my head which made me smile and it was just this. I'd made it!

I'd made it to the end of The Long Run.

Gavin and I are now, though I blush (hopefully charmingly) to recount it, rather good chums. He's here at the Collection these days, as a visiting expert in the history of his own times. He was delighted when I managed to find him two entire episodes of Blake's 7, on the original video tape. I found them to be a wonderful insight into the literature of Gavin's era. He taught me how to do the 'maximum power' thing. With the arms. And for a while I thought about getting the haircut, but that's actually rather too harsh for me. But the frocks are an entirely different story, one that...

I wonder if my publishers would be interested in a book on the subject?

Sorry, by the way, if I'm being elitist, but I like to think my readers are at least versed in the more obvious classics.

Mr Plurk has now served me his own particular version of eggs benedict, which I must say tested my flirting skills to the limit. It turns out that the reason he wanted to share his knowledge of bounty hunter culture was that he's interested in developing the field as an academic speciality: Bounty Hunter Studies. He wants to know whether or not I could put in a good word for him.

Of course, as soon as this manuscript is delivered, I will do exactly that with all due haste.

To get back to the matter of Gavin, it's odd how some things from the past survive, like he did, while other things don't make it. We know, for example, almost everything there is to know about the well-documented career of the Wee Papa Girl Rappers, as obviously we would, since they dominated the musical culture of their time, as Gavin has confirmed. But of lesser musical talents such as Bob Dylan, Steps and the Beatles, we know

almost nothing.

We end, and goodness, I'm surprised to see that we do, there's a happy accident for you, as we began, with a meditation on the question of identity. I'm still smug about how this particular incident worked out,, actually. And, of course, many of you will be familiar with the results. I can only hope that my televised adventures will be regarded by critics of the future as being of similar quality to, and have such lasting value as, Blake's 7.

10: Digging Up the Past

By Mark Michalowski

‘This must be the tackiest, most inappropriate, most unprofessional stunt you have ever pulled, Irving!’ bellowed Benny, glowering at Braxiatel and just waiting for him to call for security.

‘So that’s a no, then?’ he asked at length.

‘Oh I don’t know,’ she said, feigning indecision and coyness. ‘What do you think, Irving? Think it would be good for my image? Good for my future career?’ She leaned in over the desk, her jaw clenching. ‘I know you’ve had some stupid ideas in the past, but this takes the biscuit. You have agreed, on my behalf, to a TV company turning my life, my work, into some half-arsed docudrama!’

‘We have assurances –’

‘What you have, Irving, are cobblers. You know what TV companies are like: they’re not interested in science, in history – not unless they can turn it into a circus or a soap opera. And the thought of using a synthespian instead of me...’

Brax moved his fountain pen out of her reach. ‘But think what this would mean for the Collection,’ he said. ‘For you.’

Benny’s jaw unclenched and she headed for the door. ‘Why not ask Heggarty to do it? He’s always bleating about upping his profile – and his budget. And when the Collection’s reputation’s in tatters and interest in archaeology is at an all-time low, don’t say I didn’t warn you!’

Benny answered the knock on the door with a growl. But they knocked again.

‘Go away!’ she yelled.

‘Bernice, it’s me, Gully.’ The voice was a conspiratorial whisper, which only served to raise her hackles further.

‘What?’ She opened the door a crack to see Gully, a researcher from the Koben Foundation, looking shiftily up and down the corridor. After her meeting with Brax, she was in no mood for light dalliance with someone that resembled a character from *The Hobbit* – especially one who fancied her rotten. And either Gully was the thickest-skinned man she’d ever met (barring one, perhaps) or Koben cultural conventions meant that snubbing him was equivalent to hoiking her skirt around her waist and shouting ‘Last one aboard’s a eunuch!’

‘I’ve got something to show you,’ he said in low, urgent tones.

‘If it’s anything like the deformed biological “artefact” you showed

me last time you prefaced a conversation with those words,' Benny said levelly, 'than I'll make sure that it ends up on display in the Hall of Oddities. In a very small case.'

Gully scowled as Benny let him in.

'I've had a message from a contact on Cene,' he said, fishing out his pad. 'Some twentieth-century Terran artefacts have just been squirted out of a time sphincter on Dali Prime and I instantly thought of you.'

She hummed, trying to get a look at his pad, hoping that this wasn't just a ploy to get into her quarters.

'Interested?'

'Depends what he's got and how much he wants,' she replied, not really in the mood for fun and games. She knew full well that any payment would come out of Brax's petty-cash tin, but she certainly didn't want Gully thinking she was an easy touch. In any sense of the word.

Gully showed her the pad, and scrolled through the catalogue: assorted comic books, some chocolate bars, a couple of computer games, five odd shoes, three soft toys and some old-fashioned cassette tapes.

She shook her head dubiously. 'Sorry Gully – seen all that stuff before.'

His wrinkled face fell, and Benny almost felt sorry for him.

'Tell you what,' she said, softening a little, 'when Irving finally comes to apologise, I'll have a word with him about the chocolate and the tapes.'

'But what about the literature and the recreational programmes?'

'Comics and games, Gully. They're called comics and games. They were the ultimate collectibles at the start of the twenty-first century. The problem was *everyone* collected them. After the Great Cock Up of 2107, humanity lost most of western literature – but managed to salvage a complete run of *X-Men* comics. It's perishables and throwaway stuff that's valuable.'

'Valuable enough to have dinner with me?' ventured Gully hopefully.

'Gully, nothing's that valuable – oh stop that!' His face had fallen again. 'I'm sorry, Gully. Now's not a very good time. I've just had one hell of a row with Brax.'

'I know – everyone's talking about it already.'

'Bad news travels fast, eh?' she smiled wryly.

'So now you've pulled out, who's in the running?' he asked after an awkward pause. 'Heggarty I suppose. D'you really want him to get all the fame and glory?'

Benny laughed. 'What fame and glory? He'll be lucky if he gets viewing figures in the hundreds after his first show.'

‘Um,’ ventured Gully, moving almost imperceptibly closer to the door, ‘you do know that it’s InterMedia that’s producing it, don’t you?’

Benny looked up sharply. Brax hadn’t told her that.

‘InterMedia? *The* InterMedia? The biggest-media-production-company-in-the-sector InterMedia? Why didn’t he tell me?!’ The thought that she hadn’t given him the chance hardly occurred to her. And the fact that they were going to use a synthespian suddenly made perfect sense: the head of InterMedia was an artificial intelligence, jobs for the girls, that’s what it was. Sheer bloody nepotism.

Visions of Heggarty receiving accolades for ‘advancing the cause of archaeology’, attending gala lunches and receiving unlimited budgets for future research swam before her eyes.

She saw alien governments that had spat in her face suddenly flinging the gates wide to the old goat, a vague swoosh of red carpet beneath his feet.

‘Although I seem to recall that Heggarty’s away on Sapice until tomorrow morning...’ Gully said hesitantly.

And before he knew what had hit him, Benny had hugged him, kissed him, and was halfway down the corridor.

Less than an hour later, Layla Field stared frostily at Benny from the screen, her face an unsympathetic oval, her eyes just a little too widely spaced to be attractive. An icon showing an antique quill pen and a scroll winked gently in one corner for a moment and then vanished.

‘Good afternoon, Professor Summerfield,’ Field said, inclining her head slightly. She looked about forty, but Benny knew she was much older than that.

‘Ms Field. Thank you for taking my call. I know how busy you must be.’ In her head, Benny was running through the speeches she’d rehearsed – including the one where she told Field to go stuff her synthodocusoapodrama up her digitised arse. She’d been decidedly unimpressed with the presentation disk she’d managed to get from Brax (in exchange for a rather large chunk of pride) – more because of what it didn’t say than what it did: there was no mention of which of Benny’s projects they’d be using, no details of what credits she’d receive, little mention of collateral and merchandising fees. In short, little more than a glossy promotional brochure for InterMedia themselves.

‘Have you decided which of our talented synthespians you’d like to portray you?’

‘Well I haven’t reviewed all of them yet,’ Benny prevaricated, caught out by Field’s no-nonsense attack. ‘It’s just that the presentation seemed rather sketchy on some of the contractual

details.'

Field arched her eyebrows. 'Really? I'm sure that we forwarded a copy of the contract to Mr Braxiatel earlier this week. It's all very standard, of course.' She smiled disarmingly.

'Maybe he just forgot,' Benny said, trying to keep the ice out of her voice. 'The reason I called you, Ms Field, is that I have one or two concerns about the nature of this... "documentary".'

'I can assure you, Professor Summerfield, that it will absolutely make your name in this sector. We anticipate pay viewers of around twenty-seven billion – and repeat, non-sub viewers of a further seven billion.'

Benny came round with a jolt and realised that she didn't know how long she'd been staring at the screen. And a woman with her mouth wide open and a hint of drool on her chin does not an attractive person make. Not in business dealings. Well, not in *most* business dealings.

'Professor Summerfield? Are you still there? There seems to be a glitch in transmission.'

'What? Oh, no, no I'm here. Twenty-seven billion?'

Field gave a slow wink, inclining her head slightly. 'That's what I said, Professor Summerfield. This documentary – and we're going with a provisional title of *Digging Up the Past* – will make you and the Braxiatel Collection household names.'

'Um,' was the witty riposte that flew from Benny's tongue.

Field paused and smiled warmly. 'And although I'm sure someone with your eminence needs no doors opening for you, this series will doubtless see you welcomed on a thousand previously closed worlds.'

'Ah,' came the dazzling reply.

'Can we take that as an assent to go ahead?'

Fortunately for Benny's self-respect, she was on her own in the room, with no one to comment on her sudden and striking resemblance to a plastic nodding dog.

'Yuh,' she said decisively.

'So,' continued Field, 'we just need a decision on the synthespian. Our instinct is to go with a period persona, someone who had a track record of acting – Marilyn Monroe, Pamela Anderson, maybe even a classical actor like Joanna Lumley-Pryce.'

Twenty-seven billion.

'Thank you for your assent, Professor Summerfield. I look forward to hearing your decision on your digital alter ego. Shall we say by midday tomorrow?'

The screen blanked, but Benny hardly noticed.

'So who's this one, then?' asked Gully, shuffling his seat closer to

Bernice's as they watched the seventh potential synthespian strut her stuff on the screen.

A small caption appeared as the swaggering, high-busted beauty on screen sashayed sideways towards a pit being excavated by three eager, sweaty-faced young people wielding blow-brushes and tiny trowels. Her blonde hair was piled high on her head, a few strands curling casually and seductively down the side of her face, her hips swinging as if powered by a couple of mamboing dwarves.

'Margaret Thatcher,' Benny read from the screen. 'Eh? That doesn't sound right.' She fiddled with the keyboard in case she'd done something wrong. 'Um, I think she was a politician...'

The figure on the screen made a rather provocative comment about whether one of the students had a hammer in his pocket or whether he was just pleased to see her.

'Obviously, a rather successful one. Who the hell researched all this?' Benny hit another key, and a slim, lithe woman with short, blonde curls, wearing an odd – but not unattractive – fringed leather outfit bounced across the screen, slapping her thigh. The environment was the same as the previous test-shot – a group of students in a pit, digging away – somewhat enthusiastically and inexpertly, Benny noticed with a wince.

She brought up the same infobox to check this one's identity. 'Hmm. And that's President Hillary Clinton.'

Who immediately broke into a song about artefact hunters coming on over the hill.

'Oh, this is ridiculous!' Benny stabbed at the keyboard and the screen went blank.

Gully gave a disappointed tut. 'Aw, I was just getting into that.'

'Well I'm getting out of it,' said Benny, standing up. 'If they think that I'm going to choose one of those, those –' she fluttered her hands at the screen – 'boobs to play me, they must be mad. They obviously don't think the face of Benny Summerfield is as saleable a commodity as the face of Hillary Clinton or Pamela Anderson.'

'Pamela Anderson has a face?' asked Gully and let out a whimpering little yelp as Benny jabbed him in the thigh with a pen. 'You've gone through over an hour of this,' he said, rubbing his leg. 'And none of them are really you.'

'I know,' Benny sighed ruefully. 'Still, they can't do anything until I've signed the contract.'

'You've not signed it yet?' Gully asked, clearly puzzled.

'Field said she'd sent it a few days ago, but Brax must have forgotten to show it to me.'

Gully rummaged in the pockets of his baggy green robe and fished out a crumpled wad of papers. 'This contract?'

She stared. At the papers. At him.

‘What the hell are you doing with it?’ she snapped, snatching it from him.

‘Um, this is just a copy. Er, someone was, um, sending it round the department.’

Benny glowered at him, at the thought that every single spoddling person on the planetoid had seen her contract. Bar one. She scanned it, alternately frowning and laughing.

Gully stood silently, staring at his feet and making odd little humming noises.

‘Is this a joke?’ she said levelly.

‘Not that I know of,’ Gully said, eyeing up the doorway and obviously wondering if he could make a dash for it before being beaten senseless with the rolled up contract. ‘I mean, I haven’t actually read it myself...’ His voice tailed off lamely.

Benny cleared her throat.

“‘The Agent –” me, presumably – “hereby agrees to forgo all rights to future researches for the benefit of The Company. The Agent also consigns copyright in her personality to The Company and agrees to allow the licensing of any and all likenesses – whether physical, emotional or intellectual – for the purposes of merchandising for a period not less than one hundred years after her death...”. Basically,’ she growled, her eyes drawn back to the document like it was a particularly gruesome car crash, ‘this contract signs everything I am, everything I’ve done and everything I *will* do away to InterMedia. They can make *dolls* of me! There’s no way I’m signing *this*!’

Gully frowned. ‘But I thought you had.’

‘Gully,’ she said with infinite patience, ‘I’ve only just seen it. How could I have signed it?’

‘No, I thought you’d given your official assent to Ms Field herself.’

‘Eh?’

‘The word is out that you’d given your assent over the commlink.’

Benny rolled her eyes. ‘That doesn’t count as signing a contract, Gully. Anyone can say yes over a commlink, but they need your signat– What? *What?*’

Gully was staring down at his shoes.

She grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him until he looked at her.

‘I think you should check out contract law in this sector,’ he said quietly. ‘Assent via video is as legally enforceable as assent by signature around here. Wasn’t there an icon in the corner of the screen? Something to show the conversation was being recorded as a legally-enforceable document?’

Benny saw a huge pool of blackness swimming before her,

beckoning her in like the Angel of Death with a tiny quill pen and a scroll in its hands. She felt sick and weak, and suddenly Gully was helping her into a chair.

‘Never mind,’ she heard him saying from a long way off.

‘Just think of the viewing figures.’

Brax was unavailable. He’d been unavailable for the past four hours. She’d left messages on his email, messages on his answering service, and so many blue and yellow Post-it notes all over the door of his office that it looked like a roadkill budgerigar. But he remained stubbornly, suspiciously unavailable.

She’d gone over and over the contract. She’d checked out the local laws about this kind of thing. She’d even had a word with Ms Jones, the admin officer, who’d scanned the contract with the regretful ease of one who’d seen this kind of thing before and had informed Benny that, yes, if she’d given assent over the commlink then it was as good as signed.

So now Benny sat in the cafeteria, the crumpled sheaf of papers in her hand, trying to think of a way out.

Suicide by alcohol poisoning was, for some reason, the first possibility that came to mind. But InterMedia would have a hold over her for a hundred years after her death, by which time she’d be, well., even dead.

She could change her name, have plastic surgery. But InterMedia still had the whole of her life up to that point in their hands: everything that was Benny Summerfield, everything that was her would be owned by them.

Maybe she could appeal to Field. The phrase ‘woman to woman’ briefly popped into her head. But then she remembered that Field was no more a real woman than Benny was a woman smart enough to read the small print on her contract.

‘Bernice? Are you okay?’

‘Clear off, Gully!’ she shouted at the door, knowing full well that if she let him in he’d be leaving in a body bag.

‘I heard you were looking for Braxiatel. He’s gone off on some mission somewhere.’

‘Yeah, I bet he has,’ she rumbled’.

There was a pause and then Gully – every word sounding as if it were causing him physical pain – said: Those things that you wanted to buy. Well, I, urn... he needs to know. My friend on Cene....’ his voice tailed away feebly.

Bernice walked to the door and threw it open so quickly that Gully was nearly sucked off his feet by the draft. She held out her hand. ‘Pad.’

Reluctantly, he handed it over.

As she tapped an amount in and thumbed her authorisation, Benny cackled. 'This'll show him.' She thrust the pad back at Gully. He dared to check how much she was offering.

'But they aren't worth a tenth of this,' he gasped as she propelled him out of the door again.

'Like I care,' she laughed – and slammed the door.

'And as long as Braxiatel is picking up the tab,' she bellowed, going back to her desk, 'you can add first-class couriered shipping to that!'

She kicked around her study for a while, staring out of the windows at the verdant sweep of the lawns, vanishing over the horizon of her new home. Her old home. There was no way she could stay once InterMedia had mangled her reputation. She pictured the cold, soulless Al laughing at her.

Well, obviously, not laughing laughing. If she was cold and soulless... oh, whatever, Benny thought, wondering whether Brax would dock the cost of the stuff she'd bought off Gully from her fees for the docudrama.

And then something nudged at her with a sharp, sharp little elbow. Benny padded around her apartment as she struggled to work out what it was that was bugging her – apart from the obvious fact that she'd just made the most goddess awful stupid mistake of her career.

She stood and gazed around her quarters – so cluttered they were little more than eighths – hoping that something would jump out at her to jog her memory: in the kitchen, unwashed coffee cups were piled higgledy-piggledy by the sink, above which was a small prayer tapestry from Gjibba; over by the TV was a set of nested figurines from... from... oh hell, from somewhere a long time ago.

She scanned the desk: papers, papers and more papers; her pad; a tiny bowl with a shriveled orange –

The pad!

She snatched at it, and realised that it wasn't *her* pad she was thinking of – it was Gully's. And then it came to her all at once, bouncing around in her head as she ran into the bedroom and began scrabbling under the bed for the metal trunk that she kept her mementoes in. Junk, Jason had once (and only once) dismissively called them. But to her they were mementoes – souvenirs of her school and academy days, little crumbs from the banquet of her past with no archaeological importance, but important to her nevertheless.

She snapped the catches, opened the lid, and began rooting through the toy cars, scraps of letters and novelty keyrings until she found it: a small, rectangular piece of laminated card with a ribbed front. A growing smile on her face, she tilted it from side to side, unable to

believe what she was looking at.

Granted, the picture didn't match up at all... but it was there. It was definitely there.

She slipped the card into her pocket and powered up her terminal. It was time to do what archaeologists did best.

Smug's the word, thought Benny as she waited to be put through to Field. Smug is most definitely the word. Even Irving at his smuggest couldn't match the thick, fluffy smugness of her feelings at this very moment. She flipped the card over the backs of her fingers and took a deep breath as Field appeared on screen.

'Yes?'

'Good evening, Ms Field. Sorry to disturb you at this late hour.'

'Not at all. I work around the clock.'

'Of course you do,' Benny feigned dumbness. 'It's so easy to forget you're an AI when you look as good as you do.'

'Thank you, Professor Summerfield. Appearances are, sadly, still so important in business.'

'I'm sure they are, Ms Field. People are so conservative in their thinking, aren't they? I must admit, it surprised me to discover that one of your major shareholders is the Army of Heavenly Light – not the most, ah, liberal or modern-thinking of religious groups, I'm sure you'll agree,' Benny smiled.

'They tolerate my nature because of my business acumen, I'm sure they would be the first to admit.'

'And remarkable business acumen at that, Ms Field. How did it all start, if you don't mind my asking? How *did* you start?'

There was a pause.

'Well, since you ask, I was one of the first synthespians, back in the twenty-second century. Most of the records from that time are lost, I'm afraid, but –'

'Lost? Really?' Benny leaned closer to the screen. 'Well, it's a good job that I'm an archaeologist, isn't it? That's what we specialise in, as I'm sure you know. Digging up the past.'

For a moment, Benny was sure she saw alarm pass across the computer-generated face in front of her.

'Fascinating,' Field said after a moment, regaining her composure. 'Please remember, Professor Summerfield, we're employing you for your talents in digging up history – not dirt. It is, after all, in your contract.'

Benny gritted her teeth. 'But this is history, Ms Field. After speaking to you earlier, I had a very strange feeling that I'd seen you somewhere before. It took me ages to work out where. Your face has changed, your hair – even your name. But I just knew there was

something familiar about you.'

She paused to watch Field's mouth tighten.

'And then it came to me. Earlier today, a colleague offered me some twentieth-century artefacts. And when I remembered them, it set the ball rolling – so to speak.'

She lifted the card she'd found in her trunk and held it up to the screen.

'And digging around in my room, I found this.'

Field stared at the card – a computer game collector's card, featuring a primitive hologram of an unfeasibly proportioned blonde woman with bosoms the size of small planetoids, a pickaxe in one hand and a whip in the other.

And as Benny angled the card from side to side, the figure inclined its head and winked – the same slow, curiously sexy wink that Field had used the first time they had spoken.

Field was silent.

'Good, eh?' said Benny cheerfully, pocketing the card.

'Who'd have guessed that Ms Layla Field, business tycoon, started life as a character from a computer game for wrist-action-obsessed teens? I have to hand it to you, Ms Field, you've done a great job of covering up your past. Particularly since that past actually goes back almost two hundred years beyond your official "birthday".'

'As I'm sure you're aware,' Field replied with barely a flicker, 'resemblance does not imply relation. And I think you must be mistaken about the records.'

'Oh I don't think so, Ms Field,' said Benny, leaning back in her seat as the smugness washed over her again. 'I've done a bit more checking. It probably won't surprise you to find that Field Enterprises Inc – as your company was called then – went to great lengths to buy up all available copies of the games, not to mention all rights in it, all the code, all the graphics. And to bury them. Totally. I suppose you thought it might damage your shareholders' confidence in you if they were to discover that their beloved Layla Field had once been a tomb-robbing, saucy good-time girl? And I'm sure that the Army of Heavenly Light would be delighted to find out that, when your popularity as a game character started declining, you found a role in, ahem, more "adult" forms of digital entertainment before you reinvented yourself as a respectable businesswoman.' Benny patted her pockets as if looking for something. 'Now where did I put that video cartridge –'

'That won't be necessary,' said Field abruptly. 'What do you want?'

Benny wondered if Field had noticed that she'd only just started breathing again. 'Firstly, I'd like to talk about my fee for this project. Secondly, there are a few things in the contract that I really think

you'd like to give some more thought to – little things like giving me back my life, not making any dolls – flattering though I'm sure they'd be in one particular department. And thirdly, I'd like to talk about the choice of synthespian...'

She flashed a charming smile.

'Does the name Emma Thompson mean anything to you?'

Epilogue

And this is me. Or rather, all these stories have been me. It's good to feel that you might know who I am now. Perhaps this was a good idea, by accident, letting myself be seen from all these different angles. This has been a sort of autobiography after all. And I rather feel that I know myself as well. But that's just like holding a snowflake. It's a chaos thing, who you are. It only lasts until you've had a little sleep, or your first pint, or someone gives you an odd look.

As you'll be aware, since I got my dream casting choice, she's been me too. I've had to live up to not being able to quite do that cute little thing she does when she focuses her eyes over her nose. But people tell me I'm terribly realistic and quite like her. Ah, the pressures of fame.

Braxiatel has popped round. He looked sidelong at Mr Plurk and Mr Scozz, but didn't comment, as if they were an interior decoration choice of which he disapproved but about which he was far too polite to comment. He tells me that tonight there's some kind of function for some visiting dignitaries. Despite my lack of sleep, I feel that my efforts of the last few days deserve some reward. Gully, Anderson, Gavin and, visiting once more, Guy, are going to be there. So I will have to unearth my mark two party dress from the wardrobe. Mark two being just as glamorous, but made of a more hard-wearing, indeed, so the dressmakers tell me, bullet-resistant, material. Maximum power.

Now that I'm played by a celebrity synthespian, I doubt I'll have any trouble forcing myself to throw back a pint or two and dance on whatever tables present themselves. Actually, I doubt I'd have any trouble with that anyway. I am Bernice Summerfield, after all.

I've had to tell the bounty hunters that they're not invited.

They seem to have rather settled down here, and during Brax's visit I had to nudge Mr Plurk quite pointedly to prevent him from shyly putting his scheme for retirement to his potential employer there and then. As it turned out; they both pursued him out into the corridor; giving me the opportunity to talk openly for a few minutes. I intend to have them out of the house as soon as this book is sent off to the publisher, and then to spray the place with something that smells of scones. Or perhaps just make scones. Or both.

As to the future, who knows? I'm comfortable here, but then, I thought I was comfortable at my last university; and that appointment ended with the planet being destroyed. I was comfortable being married to Jason, for a while, comfortable with the idea of a future with him. But that all got twisted about by chaos and turned into a combination of musical comedy and supernatural horror. Of which, and some days I think I can use the word 'hope' about this, and some days it's 'dread', I have a feeling there's

more to come.

I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I'm aware that there are still a few twists and turns ahead of me, that I haven't reached my golden autumn of closure yet. Which is good news for my viewers and readers, because that means I'll continue to have new adventures.

Thank the Goddess.

Historical note: Mr Plurk later became Professor Plurk, inaugurator of the Plurk Chair of Bounty Hunter Studies at the Braxiatel Collection. Mr Scozz attempted to start a course in the same field of academia, but was sadly killed in a gunfight during his first tutorial session. Professor Summerfield remains at the Braxiatel Collection, where her lectures have recently been picketed by members of the Carnexti Veterans Association. Nonetheless, as she herself predicted, Professor Summerfield continues to have adventures.

Appendix

I've been asked to include in this volume all that remains, following a terrible, terrible, fire, of my vast, sadly now lost to posterity manuscript, A Brief History of Time (Working Title), my encyclopedia covering all aspects of archaeology which was due to be released, several years ago, by this very publishing house. I'm pleased to comply, especially since it'll bump up the word count a bit.

Extract Begins:

In the last chapter we dealt with the histories, cultures and societies of all major spacefaring races. In this, and the next two chapters, I propose to deal with a much wider subject.

Packing Your Bag:

The serious archaeologist requires three categories of thing in their bag.

- 1: Tools, texts and equipment.
- 2: Practicalities. Toothbrush, etc.
- 3: Fun things.

In this chapter, I shall deal with the necessary tools, texts and...
(Note: get back to that.)

Fun Things:

- 1: One bottle Irish.
- 2: One bottle Scotch (we may get fed up with Irish).
- 3: One packet condoms (although mine keep going past their use-by date without being used, and thus end up on students' heads in bars, and I once picked up an Abruksan brand by mistake (Note: mention use of such as hot-air balloon). It's better to be safe than sorry).
- 4: Bread for toast.
- 5: Toaster.
- 6: Generator to plug toaster into.
- 7: Gravity unit to carry generator. (Or, actually, just a loaf and some flints would probably do.)
- 8: Good book, for when the crew you've hired are all busy brushing little bits of pottery and nothing exciting's going to happen for hours. I like Jane Austen, myself. Well, that is to say, I didn't like

her when I met her, because she kept on trying to set me up for bons mots and had one of those looks. With that sort of personality plus a parasol, you couldn't fit more than one Jane Austen in a lift. Should you wish to. But I liked her boots. And her books. (Note: bit of editing?)

9: A frock of some kind. Some would say that this is a luxury, but wherever you are, there may be a dance. (Note: Isn't that a good title for the autobiography? Must get round to starting work on that. It's very important, and I really respect my editor.)

10: Oh, and don't pack mugs with jokes on. Because you will tire of them (What time is it? Goodness, all this theory, and the opportunity for practical experience is passing me by. New chapter tomorrow...)

Extract Ends.

The style is, perhaps, a little juvenile, but I remain proud of what would have proved to be, had any reader ever set eyes on it, undoubtedly my finest work. I weep for what might have been. Ahem. Hee hee hee. Oh. Do you think the audio dictation link picked that up?

I've just realised. Someone I once knew once met someone who'd met someone who'd met someone who was in Blake's 7.

Not the TV programme. The terrorist organisation.

That can't be right.

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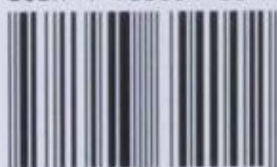
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